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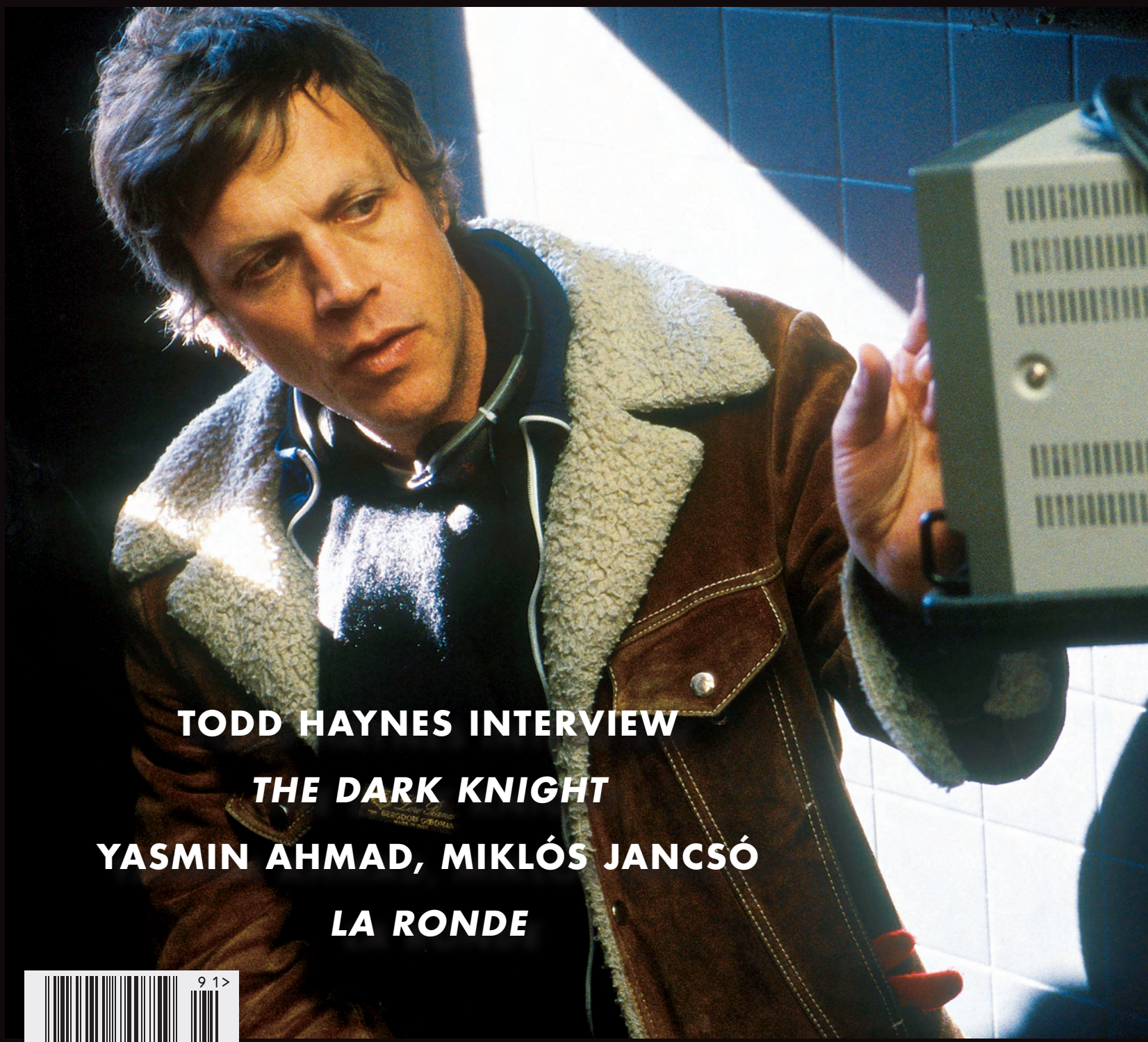

TODD HAYNES INTERVIEW

THE DARK KNIGHT

YASMIN AHMAD, MIKLÓS JANCSÓ

LA RONDE

TODD HAYNES, SUPERHEROES

Volume 62 Number 3

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Film Quarterly
Spring 2009 Volume 62 Number 3

28 **AMERICAN HEROES**
J. M. Tyree on levity and calamity in superhero blockbusters

35 **WHAT'S NEW IN *THE NEW WORLD*?**
Edward Buscombe assesses what Terrence Malick makes of Pocahontas

41 **THE POLITICS OF STYLE IN MIKLÓS JANCSÓ'S *THE RED AND THE WHITE* AND *THE LORD'S LANTERN IN BUDAPEST***
Laszlo Strausz decodes two versions of Hungarian political allegory

48 **YASMIN AHMAD'S "ORKED" TRILOGY**
Gerald Sim on a Malaysian filmmaker's postcolonial cinema of emotion

54 **FROM UNDERGROUND TO MULTIPLEX: AN INTERVIEW WITH TODD HAYNES**
Scott MacDonald talks about the avant-garde with the director of *I'm Not There*

www.filmquarterly.org
www.ucpressjournals.com/fq

COLUMNS

4 **EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK**
MATTERS ARISING, CROSS-REFERENCES
Doubt, Frost/Nixon, Man on Wire

8 **MARX AND COCA-COLA**
NEW RELEASES IN THEORY
Joshua Clover *Cadillac Records, Milk, W.*

10 **NEW YORK NOTEBOOK**
REPERTORY, NEW RELEASES
William Johnson *Antonio Gaudí, Harvard Beats Yale 29–29, Waiting for Armageddon*

14 **TALKING POINTS**
OPINION, DEBATE
Nick James what matters in film criticism
Jonathan Rosenbaum New Wave sexism

19 **RECONSIDERATION**
DVD REISSUES
Geoffrey Nowell-Smith *La Ronde*

23 **SECOND TIME AROUND**
DVD REISSUES
D. A. Miller *La Ronde*

66 **TWO-POINT-ZERO**
MOVIES ONLINE
Ben Walters *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*

68 **ART HOUSE**
AVANT-GARDE MOVIES
Danny Birchall London film festival
John Minkowsky Massachusetts shows

90 **INTERTITLES**
FILM BOOKS
Paul Thomas John Frankenheimer

BOOK REVIEWS

76 **Alan Nadel**
What Makes Films Historical?

DIRECTORS

80 **Russell Merritt**
Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination by Neal Gabler | *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* by Michael Barrier

82 **Richard Neupert**
Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies: A Companion to the Classic Cartoon Series by Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman

83 **David Sterritt**
Hitchcock's Romantic Irony by Richard Allen

84 **Martin Fradley**
The Impossible David Lynch by Todd McGowan

OVERVIEWS

85 **Donald F. Larsson**
Becoming Film Literate: The Art and Craft of Motion Pictures by Vincent LoBrutto | *Film: A Critical Introduction* by Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis

86 **David Church**
The Cult Film Reader, ed. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik | *Cult Films: Taboo and Transgression—A Select Survey Over 9 Decades* by Allan Havis

89 **D. K. Holm**
Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work by J. J. Murphy

SEND IN THE CYBORGS

***Man on Wire* (James Marsh)**
***Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard)**
***Doubt* (John Patrick Shanley)**

On August 7, 1974, above the morning commuters, Philippe Petit stepped out on a high wire extended between the World Trade Center twin towers. The exploit brought the French acrobat huge celebrity, token rebukes, and a new life: he became Artist-in-Residence at the Cathedral Church of St John the Divine in New York. After 9/11, Petit's walk gained memorial power. "Once there were two towers," begins Mordicai Gerstein's 2003 children's story, *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* (Square Fish, 2007). But it is one of the many merits of *Man on Wire*, a near-perfect documentary, that it summons up the walk's grandeur without spelling out the symbolism. The film has no narration. Lighthearted silent-cinema pastiches do a witty reenactment job; together with TV reports, some plans and drawings, and home movies, they provide a setting for recollections by the garrulous Petit and his assistants, and sublime photographs of that hazy summer Wednesday (many of them taken by Jean-Louis Blondeau, a member of the team who clandestinely rigged the cable). In one snapshot taken from the street, a plane is flying above the WTC. The lines of its wings—and surely also its resemblance to 9/11 photos—may distract us for a moment from what is most breathtaking: the miniscule funambulist, his balancing pole a slender string perpendicular to the tightrope.

Those who witnessed this virtuoso performance were staggered by its audacity and beauty. James Marsh includes a news clip in which, almost expressionless except that at the end he seems unsettled, Sergeant Charles Daniels speaks words of wonder in an official monotone: "I observed the tightrope dancer—because you couldn't call him a 'walker' . . . Everyone was spellbound in the watching of it . . . I personally figured I was watching something that somebody else would never see again in the world. Thought it was once in a lifetime." Petit stayed out there for nearly an hour, skipping away from the building just when police thought he might be coming in. At a certain point, documented in *Man on Wire* by Blondeau's color photo, he knelt down to give the artiste's open-arm salute. His lover of the time, Annie Alix, was standing below and she seems simultaneously euphoric and distraught, fervent and hesitant, as she recounts the gesture: "It was so beautiful—and, um—when he knelt down—there was a moment when he knelt down and saluted—." I was, in turn, shaken by *Man on Wire*; its emotional impact is extraordinary.

⁂

The topic that comes round and round in this issue—notably in the pieces by Joshua Clover, Gerald Sim, and Laszlo Strausz—is the conflict between impersonal forces and individual action; the dance and the dancer; the system's "perpetual motion machine" (to use a phrase from J. M. Tyree's essay on superheroes) and the personal pirouettes which may or may not be just a part of the machine. The other repeating concern is desire and its many discontents, and the two themes combine in the readings of Ophuls's *La Ronde* (now available again on DVD) by D. A. Miller and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. They share a starting point—"Sex is the lowest common denominator" (Nowell-Smith), "the triumph of the sex drive" (Miller)—but where the former finds tenderness, the latter discerns disenchantment, and there are further variations of exegesis besides. One might have called it a critical *pas de deux*, were it not for the fact that the two writers have not discussed *La Ronde* with each other.

Our cover feature is Scott MacDonald's in-depth conversation with Todd Haynes about the intersection of narrative cinema and what Haynes calls the "experimental vernacular." The interview's title, "From Underground to Multiplex," sums up an element of *Film Quarterly* policy which is conspicuous in this issue: to maintain a wide-ranging, perhaps even promiscuous, coverage, and so move at the turn of a page or two from *Milk* to *Antonio Gaudí*, or from Joss Whedon's Internet musical to Chantal Akerman's gallery installations.

⁂

Near the start of *Man on Wire*, a TV screen shows Richard Nixon making a statement. (The day after Petit's expedition, the president resigned.) The screen-within-a-screen conceit is one that appears repeatedly in *Frost/Nixon*, which also has fake-documentary talking heads and numerous behind-the-scenes shots that visualize the recording apparatus. On two occasions, characters furthermore pause to speak about close-

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Complex witnesses

Man on Wire. © 2007 Wall to Wall (Egypt) Ltd/UK Film Council. DVD: Icon Home Entertainment (U.K.).

ups and, according to James Reston (Sam Rockwell), their "reductive power." All this self-referential business is no more an exercise in distancing than the framing devices in Stoker's *Dracula*—and in its own way Ron Howard's film is a sensationalist monster story. "David [Frost] had succeeded," according to the climactic Reston mockumentary speech, in "getting . . . Richard Nixon's face, swollen and ravaged by loneliness, self-loathing and defeat." It is as if we have strayed into the macabre carnival of the films Tyree discusses, where characters' personality splits and back-story traumas get embodied as mutations and mutilations. Nixon is even given a primal scene of misery (feelings of social humiliation at college—or so he drunkenly discloses in an improbable late-night phone call). The trouble is that, playing the president,

A Sphinx

Frost Nixon Watergate. © 1977 David Paradine Productions Inc. DVD: DDS Media (U.K.).

Frank Langella is courtly and dignified; rueful and weary to be sure but, so far as I could see, unravaged.

The scarred carnival clown is absent; but then he was never there in the first place. Available on a DVD entitled *Frost Nixon Watergate*, the key March 1977 session is difficult to parse. From time to time, eyes wistfully far-away, Nixon does offer some genre fiction, though it is melancholic pastoral rather than horror, a slight quaver in his voice rather than the real villainous cackle. The scene is a cabin at Camp David: "The tulips had just come out. I'll never forget, we looked out across—it was one of those gorgeous days when, you know, no clouds were on the mountain. And I was pretty emotionally wrought-up and I remember that I could just hardly bring myself to tell Ehrlichman that he had to go . . . I think there were tears in our eyes, both of us." It is strangely fluent given a lot of stuttering elsewhere, as though it had been rehearsed. Enigmatic in another way is a moment after Frost invites the president to unburden himself ("unless you say it you're going to be haunted for the rest of your life"): Nixon's eyes roll back for an instant. He might be about to faint. Then he seems to relax into the halting admission of limited wrongdoing. Watching the interview, I gleaned fatigue, fear, secretiveness, maybe grief, steely determination, but there are numerous other possible interpretations—the least persuasive of which may be *Frost/Nixon*'s claim that we see a self-evident manifestation of moral torment.

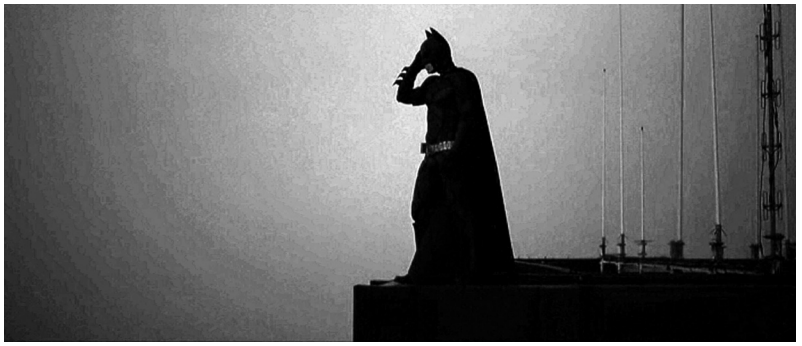
"I sort of cracked up," Nixon told Frost in 1977, but there is hardly a hairline fracture to be seen in the original TV broadcast. The president's face remains ambiguous or inscrutable, as is often the case in documentary close-ups. Consider a very different, yet arguably emblematic shot from near the end of *Man on Wire*. "There was something broken probably in this friendship," Blondeau says, looking back at the disbanding of the tightrope team, and as he does so he suppresses the sobbing that comes with the words, bowing his face against his arched hands to shield himself from the camera. I was touched by the brief sight of this warm, modest, disconcerted man's sadness and the way his gesture suggests the idea that mostly the close-up may be a kind of cover-up.

⁂

In Christopher Nolan's brilliant version of Batman, *The Dark Knight*, there are frequent helicopter shots of streets and skyscrapers. They are depersonalizing, somewhat like the swooping aerial views in Miklós Jancsó's *The Red and the White*, in which a visual analogy is made between fleeing horses and men, all of them gun fodder. The sequence, according to Strausz's analysis of its politics, "sets up an impersonal sphere which functions as a commentary on the disappearance of subjective, personal space under the Communist regime." By contrast, *The Dark Knight* gives us, among the more frequent drone's-eye views, occasional images of heroic individualism, notably when Batman (Christian Bale) stands on the top of buildings to scrutinize the city. He is not the only such figure in this year's Oscar-nominated movies.

She wears a bonnet rather than a mask, but Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep) in *Doubt*, based on John Patrick Shanley's own Pulitzer-winning play, is as much of a caped Gotham avenger as Batman. Principal of a Catholic school in the Bronx, she suspects Father Brendan Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) may be a pedophile with designs on the school's only black student, Donald Miller (Joseph Foster). She has no proof and has to rely on hunches, surmises, and on how Flynn and the boy's mother (Viola Davis) respond when questioned. (In the fine scene between Davis and Streep, the nun realizes that Mrs. Miller is ahead of her investigatively.) The principal dragoons a much younger teacher, Sister James (Amy Adams), an idealistic ingénue who worries about due process, much as many viewers will.

Sister Aloysius's watchfulness is emphasized at the beginning of *Doubt*. She sternly patrols church during service and a little later she beadily sees a schoolboy recoil from Flynn's outstretched hand. The observation fires up her suspicion of the priest. For the rest of the film, she only has eyes for him, and Shanley explores the ramifications of such a fierce gaze, especially the resulting clash between ecclesiastical authority and conscience, orthodoxy and skepticism, feeling and reason. In the original play (Theatre Communications Group, 2005), the rational character of Sister Aloysius's outlook is more explicit. "The heart is warm," she says, "but your wits must be cold."



Remote control

The Dark Knight. © 2008 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. DVD: Warner Home Video.

She moves from vigilance to vigilantism and, as she does so, the connections between *Doubt* and *The Dark Knight* proliferate. A duet in contrasting vernaculars can be heard between Sister Aloysius and Batman's mentoring factotum, Alfred (Michael Caine). On unreformability: "Some men . . . can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn" (Alfred). "A dog that bites is a dog that bites" (Sister Aloysius). On ostracism as the price of dissent and intervention: "That's the point of Batman. He can be the outcast. He can make the choice that no one else can make. The right choice" (Alfred). "I will step outside the Church if that's what needs to be done, though the door should shut behind me!" (Sister Aloysius). In both films the social order is corrupt. Subversive tactics are called for: spying, set-ups, con tricks.

Perhaps the most interesting of numerous small changes made in adapting the play for the cinema is a conversation that occurs in Sister James's classroom after the pupils have left. Sister Aloysius enters and, after rummaging around, takes a framed photograph of Pope Pius XII out of a desk drawer. When the young nun objects that he is dead (it is 1964), the principal snaps back: "I don't care what pope it is. Use the glass to see behind you. The children should think you have eyes in the back of your head." (There is no such picture in the play and the line is accordingly different: "The children should think you see right through them.")

The Dark Knight's take on the theme of surveillance is more disturbing and topical. Batman manages to network all the city's cellphones to create a "high-frequency generator receiver." Even though he is appalled by it, Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) understands the power of this panoptic device which can locate the marauding Joker. "You took my sonar concept and applied it to every phone in the city. With half the city feeding you sonar, you can image all of Gotham."

Batman's superpower has, however, a complication: he must outsource his sight in order to hunt. He becomes a kind of cybersentinel—and one depicted as blind, his human eyes erased to leave just a sheen of pale magenta light, his vision wirelessly prosthetic ("Fox, I need picture") and digitized as Lucius reluctantly operates a computer system which, "null-key encrypted" though it may be, subsumes any individual. The network can look right through Batman now. With newborn machine eyes, is this the same hero who peered down from the towering roofs? Those shots begin to seem like elegiac portraits of a bygone phantom, as anachronistic as *Doubt*'s improvised picture-mirror in the age of Facebook and GPS—of volunteered and automated images so blindingly multitudinous that maybe no idea of vigilance can cope with them.

Rob White

BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS

***Milk* (Gus Van Sant)**
***Cadillac Records* (Darnell Martin)**
***W.* (Oliver Stone)**

Everyone complains about biopics, but no one does anything about them.

It is a well-known fact among cinephiles and people of taste that the biopic is an abject sort of entertainment, ruled by cliché and following a narrative arc more rigid than Calvinism. The genre is excoriated in polite conversation with meticulous regularity.

It is without fail the case that these cultured denunciations appear only to be confounded: the punchline is most often a rapturous and/or tortured explication of why *this* particular case is extraordinary, highest honors to follow. *Ray*, *The Queen*, *Ma vie en rose*. Oscar, Oscar, Oscar. *Walk the Line*, a movie of such comical predictability that its parody, *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story*, couldn't keep up, not only earned an Academy Award for its female lead, Reese Witherspoon, but a nomination for Joaquin Phoenix. He lost out—to Philip Seymour Hoffman, for *Capote*.

In short, we live in an inverted world where the worst sort of films, as generally agreed, are in some way the best sort of films, as also generally agreed. All exception, no rule: the category "biopic" turns out to be an empty set. Every film that risks incarceration within its brackets manages to escape, led to freedom by some reputedly superlative acting performance, to turn up later at the Academy Awards. It will happen again this year, sometime between the writing and the printing of this column.

Milk, casting its nets directly at the statuettes, faintly screams quality. And virtue, and craft—all the things good taste can't bear to renounce, even now. Tears are jerked. The film's no *Zodiac* but its mise-en-scène suitably conjures period atmospherics, *cine qua non* of the biopic. *Milk* is as good as American Sentimental Realism gets and so, despite being terrifically dull, it may even get Best Picture: a polite retraction, in the bereft calculus of Hollywood, of that *Brokeback Mountain*/*Crash* cockup in 2005.

The side players are swell and all discussions of the lead performance are attended by the word "Oscar." Sean Penn has reached the same zenith as Meryl Streep or Helen Mirren, and one expects him to win an award almost every time out. He can really act, including the part where he doesn't make a big show of it. That approach has worked for a while as counterpoint to those old charming hams like Al Pacino or Jessica Lange, but by now we've had years to attune our sensibilities to the quarter-crinkle of an eyebrow suggesting a complex but repressed inner life. Understated is the new overstated; as with Mirren, it's impressive and intolerable all at once (Josh Brolin is a lot more gripping, standing at the edge of control as an actor as does his character, gun-toting family man Dan White).

Penn's performance wants at once to be warts-and-all and perfectly smooth at the same time. Harvey Milk isn't portrayed as a saint, which would shatter the film's surface; nonetheless, he is herein the least self-aggrandizing character in the history of California electoral politics. A schemer, sure—but for the cause, always for the cause. Never once does he act out of the will to power, money, blow jobs. In some regard one can't blame a film for soliciting its imagined audience with an imagined world—it's a business, I hear—but this nonetheless clarifies the peculiar dishonesty of the genre. Biopics are forgiven their limitations exactly because they make a claim on verisimilitude, selling the reality effect at every stratum from acting style to finely aged film stock. Which makes it fair game to suggest that they are not only stultifying, but almost inevitably harbor a yawning unreality at the core.

If *Milk* cheats human complexity, *Cadillac Records* does the same and then some. Charting the rise and fall of great blues label Chess Records, the film plays fast and loose with chronology, which is merely unsettling. More noticeably it evacuates Elvis Presley from history: the first time we hear white rock'n'roll ripping off black artists, it's The Beach Boys' "Surfin' U.S.A.," a 1963 reworking of Chuck Berry. Elvis appears for two seconds on a television screen; he's never mentioned. In a history of 1950s music, particularly one with constant discussion of the charts and crossing over, this lacuna verges on Brechtian estrangement.

The film is more the biography of a business than a person. (Don't we need a subgenre for this—the *bizpic*, maybe?) Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Etta James et al. make more hits than money under the shrewd patronage of Leonard Chess, though he seems to love them one and all; it's a family,

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Psychology today: the real character of the biopic

Left: *Milk*. © Focus Features LLC/Axon Film Finance 1 LLC. Courtesy Momentum Pictures. Right: *Cadillac Records*. Sony BMG Film, Parkwood Pictures, Tristar Pictures. Courtesy Sony Pictures Releasing.

albeit one where the black children get screwed. Surely this is meant to fire our liberal hearts with outrage. En route to this effect, the movie traffics in the most venomous hoodoo. The black players are sensual, inspired, rutting; the white impresarios are self-aware, controlled, calculating. We are meant to accept this in so far as it explains the dynamic of exploitation between European rationalism and African naturalism; does anyone go for that shit anymore? That exploitation is somehow a story of character, of one's individual *nature*. And of course this finally explains the mystery of the absent Elvis: the great neither/nor, the white sensualist, the shocking primitive able nonetheless to seize the reins of his own career. Because he can't be fit to *Cadillac Records*'s problematic schema, he can't be allowed to appear in the film's "true story."

But the nuttiest biopic of the season is surely Oliver Stone's *W.*—though the strangeness exists in the negative. The film is plodding, even gelid. And yet in terms of cognitive dissonance, *W.* is more disturbing than that frenetic, jagged triumph of Hollywood avant-garderie, *Natural Born Killers*. Wthin the Likely Audience For An Oliver Stone Film, its subject's transcendent villainy is a matter of religious certainty. It strikes with the force of absolute perversity, thusly, that the movie's George W. Bush turns out to be, eh, just some guy. He's a somewhat wistful and churlish frat boy from a powerful family who makes it, we discover, by relying on his capable memory: first for the nicknames of his frat brothers, and eventually for Karl Rove's talking points. Meanwhile he struggles, frets, goes with the flow, and occasionally kicks against the pricks.

Discomfort being the soul of humor, the film's discomfiting gap between expectation and presentation makes it seem a comedy, or nearly so. And then one feels uncomfortable about that, too—about laughing over such a horror show (we have access to the hilarity of the Bush years only when the reality effect is entirely shelved: *Team America: World Police* had to be conducted by marionettes). The funny thing, finally, is this: *W.* should be unconventional, given that it depicts a sitting president and one generally considered an exceptional case, to say the least. And yet it is the quintessential biopic: it renders its subject as flawed but finally somewhat sympathetic character, pushed about by events and shamed by his disapproving and superior dad.

Which is to say: it psychologizes. That's what biopics do, and what they are: not biographies per se, but treatments that agree in advance on a conventional and banal understanding of psychological mechanism. The Oedipal study is the most common form, but a full taxonomy of the various options wouldn't carry one much past mid-semester in Psych 101. Hence the relentless awarding of Oscars for acting: it is the genre that assumes more than any other that history unfurls because of *character formation* and for no other reason. It would be a commonplace to note that Hollywood is the cinema of bourgeois individualism, as a rule; the biopic is simply the ur-case of this, which perhaps begins to explain the contradictory place it holds in the cinematic consciousness: it exemplifies the world view cherished by Hollywood, but at the same time exposes how straitened that conception is.

What then about a biopic that sets itself polemically against the biopic's world view? This, clearly enough, is the question of Steven Soderbergh's two-part *Che*; but that shall have to wait for the next column.

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ON BROADMINDEDNESS

***Antonio Gaudí* (Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1984)**
***Harvard Beats Yale 29–29* (Kevin Rafferty)**
***Waiting for Armageddon* (Kate Davis, Franco Sacchi, David Heilbroner)**

If possible, I see a film at least twice before writing about it. For Teshigahara's *Antonio Gaudí*, an unusual documentary about the work of the Catalan architect, it was indeed possible. I saw it first in 1986 at a small independent theater in New York City and again at the same theater (now in larger premises) when it was reshown in 2008. Though made in 1984 it did not seem to have aged. Even what's glimpsed of cars and of clothing in the film's summer days doesn't obviously date it.

Except for two scenes of public dancing near the beginning, a few comments about Gaudí by an old man near the end, and occasional background noises of traffic and people in-between, the soundtrack consists of continual, often subtly shifting music by Teshigahara's regular composer, Toru Takemitsu, along with Kurodo Mori and Shinji Hori. There is no commentary, and only small white captions briefly identify the buildings shown. The soundtrack alone distinguishes the film from virtually every other documentary I've ever seen.

The film opens in Barcelona with a colorfully lighted display of a complex fountain, an apt introduction to Gaudí's work of extraordinary shapes, details, and unexpected colors. Teshigahara has his cameramen suggest motion by placing them fairly close to Gaudi's buildings and then having them pan, tilt, or dolly over the exteriors and interiors, and sometimes from one to the other.

Early in the film, by contrast with Gaudí's almost tactile richness, there is a shot that slowly pans down over what look like two old paintings of people being tortured. In the first a man is being cut in two vertically by a two-handed saw. The saw has almost reached his waist but his upper parts haven't fallen apart, and the man's halved face bears an expression only of irritation. The next painting is of a couple in a cauldron of water being boiled over a fire, and they look bored.

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There's nothing irritating or boring about what Teshigahara shows us of Gaudí's work. The film includes a variety of buildings not only in Barcelona but also in places well outside the city. As usual, there is no unnecessary information. A shot of a man leading a cow along a road is enough to tell us that we're no longer in the city. The churches and large residences give way to smaller but still unusual churches (like one that seems half open to the sky), an elaborate drinking fountain in a park, undulating walls and seats around a play area, odd rounded triangular window shapes, and so forth.

Wood, polished or rough or patterned; cement; pottery in a variety of shapes and colors; tiles like fish scales; bulbous stone; glass; metals—any of those materials may be brought together in Gaudí's work. Walls in a hallway may shift angles from one end to the other. Windows and doors may be set in any shape. Roofs and exterior walls may bend and bulge. Houses and apartment buildings may look somewhat crazy, but the people glimpsed living there seem to enjoy them.

From time to time during the scenes in Barcelona there are distant glimpses of the eight tallest towers of Gaudí's unfinished masterpiece, El Templo de la Sagrada Familia (The Church of the Holy Family). Finally Teshigahara lets us confront it closely from all kinds of angles, including shots that seem to have required the cinematographers to be hauled up facades on ropes. Although the church has been and still is being worked on, estimates of its completion run to the year 2050. Thus Teshigahara's views of it are not obviously different from recent photographs.

What's seems puzzling about the impressiveness of the film is that Gaudí's rampaging architecture is virtually the antithesis of traditional Japanese art, which relies essentially on restraint. True, Teshigahara made several films from the novels of Kobo Abe that are offbeat and even disturbing, notably *Woman in the Dunes* and *The Face of Another*. And there's a further complexity. Teshigahara's father ran a highly respected ikebana (flower-arranging) school, and soon after he died in 1980 his son took over the position, introducing new ideas that offended some traditionalists. Thus Teshigahara was prepared to see a connection between the minimalism of Japanese culture and the maximalism of the west, and celebrated them together in the masterpiece of *Antonio Gaudí*.

Antonio Gaudí. © 1984 Teshigahara Productions/2008 Toho Co. Ltd. DVD: Criterion Collection.

⁂

If I hadn't seen *Antonio Gaudí* I would not have gone to see Kevin Rafferty's film. I grew up in England and preferred the free flow of soccer to the continual pauses of rugby, which are as nothing compared to what I see as the unending hiatuses of (American) football. But thanks to the inspiration of Teshigahara's cultural broadmindedness, I decided to see *Harvard Beats Yale 29–29*—and enjoyed it.

Of course, the clips of the actual 1968 game, where the two hitherto undefeated college teams clashed, focus on the high spots rather than the timeouts and neither-side-getting-anywhere passages. What's more, Rafferty, who directed, photographed, and edited the film, includes extensive interviews with many of the players on both teams as they are now.

These interviews, in which the former players reminisce and speak rather than answer questions (Rafferty's voice is heard, briefly, only once), also provide a contrast between the world of 1968 (Vietnam, Students for a Democratic Society, etc.) and the world of today. This is one of the strengths of documentary at its best: it can bring past and present together without taking sides between them.

Roofs and exterior walls may bend and bulge. Houses and apartment buildings may look somewhat crazy, but the people glimpsed living there seem to enjoy them.

If you happen to be as unfamiliar as I was with this football clash forty years ago, the title comes from the *Harvard Crimson*. Less than two minutes before the game at the Harvard stadium ended, Yale was leading by 29–13 and its supporters were chanting "You're Number Two!" The last hundred seconds were and now are a documentary of the unexpected.

⁂

If the change of tone between the first two films is considerable, it becomes immense between both of them and *Waiting for Armageddon*. Watching the film, in which many likable-looking people express their views about life and death, was the most chilling experience I've had for some time.

These people are evangelicals who believe that the end of the world is near, and that it will follow this pattern: first the Rapture will take all believers up to heaven; then the Tribulation will bring massive catastrophes to those of us left on Earth; then the war of Armageddon will finish off all the rest of us; and finally the Millennium will clean up Earth so that it can become a New Jerusalem for those deemed truly godly.

I couldn't help thinking of Michael Tolkin's 1991 fiction film *The Rapture*, which in most ways has nothing in common with *Waiting for Armageddon*. But it reminded me that I've had to wait nearly eighteen years to see another such provocative film about the dark side of religion.

What's good about the film is that it doesn't show any perceivable bias. I can only recall one evangelical who made a snide remark. There was also just one man who made his belief an issue of "great America" versus the rest of the world. Most of us have probably been embarrassed by allies like that.

What is clear from the beginning (although the filmmakers never spell it out) is that the evangelicals we see have no sense of history. They do not know (or have rejected) the history of the universe, the history of humankind, the history of religion, and the history of the Bible, all of which raise questions about their beliefs.

The boyfriend of an evangelical young woman (who works in hi-tech aeronautics) goes along with her belief because he apparently has none of his own. A pleasant-looking family talks to us on the assumption that the Rapture is imminent, and the two teenage girls smilingly admit that they will to some extent miss having a full earthly life. Other evangelicals, too, assume the same imminence, as if humankind has never suffered from problems and conflicts as it does today.

One issue that plays a significant part in the film is the evangelicals' attitude toward Jews. Jesus was a Jew, and Israel is the hot spot of his life and death. The film shows evangelicals on visits to Jerusalem. At one point there is a statement that 144,000 Jews will be saved along with the evangelicals, but the rest will die along with all of us unbelievers. Two rabbis calmly give their different views of that. Muslims, on the other hand, are completely beyond the pale, and evangelicals want their temple (on Jerusalem's Temple Mount) destroyed.

Since the filmmakers were obviously trying not to show any bias, it's worth noting that the complexity of film scenes and sequences makes it difficult to eliminate all accidental implications. In one scene, a young woman on an evangelical group's tourist bus in Jerusalem says, "We'll be able to watch Armageddon . . . a lot of fun!" Cut to exterior of the bus passing by. It has two projections from the front that suggest the horns of a devil.

Chilled though I was by the beliefs involved, the film fascinated me from start to finish.

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RIP IT UP: REVITALIZING FILM CRITICISM

For the last six months or so the idea that film criticism is undergoing an identity crisis has been gaining momentum. I carry some of the blame for this, having edited a "Who Needs Critics?" special issue of *Sight and Sound*, and organized and participated in public debates, some of which were even entertaining.

Of course this anxiety is only a symptom of the wider recession crisis most workers face, not least the many journalists who know there's a good chance they will lose their job this year. But film critics were canaries of the employment catastrophe. Once it became known that, over a two-year period, newspapers across the U.S. had shed more than thirty film reviewers without replacement, a chain reaction of debates and surveys about criticism spread through the cinephile global village. In film journals the huge success of Web 2.0 was identified as the main catalyst for change and yet the conclusion reached almost universally by commentators was that criticism on the Internet is mostly a positive thing, and if it is available for free, so much the better.

I have no argument with that conclusion; the second-phase Internet is here to stay, and to fret upon its disadvantages is to indulge nostalgia. I'm more interested in how the Web affects the culture of criticism, and whether or not this creeping feeling that writing about film may have become less important is justified. My involvement in debates about this has taken my thinking in two directions: toward a pragmatic reappraisal of the usefulness of film critics (and let's make that an all-inclusive term for writers on film), and conversely back through the winding biographical route that brought me to film reviewing, perhaps to rediscover what about criticism truly matters.

To most people the primary use of a newspaper reviewer is to be a guide for the consumer as to what or what not to see. This, of course, is how most people define the critic's role. Unfortunately, it is that narrowly defined professional function, the reviewer—once so commercially influential—whose importance has been downgraded. I don't believe that amateur online reviewers and bloggers are mainly responsible for this downshift. It's rather the vast quantity of all kinds of free advance information about films now available to the single individual (the punter who in the past would have had access only to some posters and a handful of reviews at most) from official and viral marketing campaigns, fan sites, festival reportage, and so forth that makes much professional consumer guidance seem dispensable. Any filmgoer can now determine whether or not most films on release will suit her or his taste without recourse to printed release-week reviews: such are the benefits of instant information and saturation marketing.

But if the professional critic's thumb up, thumbs down gesture really is subsumed in the audio-visual noise around film releases, what remains? Surely all that time critics spend researching the cinema to gain an informed understanding has value, and not just for the moment of consumption?

In the public discussions in which I've taken part I've broken down the critic's usefulness as follows, in no particular order: (1) saying if a film is worth seeing, (2) championing good unknown work, (3) giving a wider historical perspective, (4) offering the insights of technical knowledge, (5) conferring useful prestige and kudos upon producers of good cinema, (6) earmarking the best works for future historians, (7) counteracting marketing untruths, and (8) opposing the retrograde.

About half of these attributes are only useful to filmgoers before a screening; the rest equally engage the post-screening reader. Surely, whenever the emphasis in the film critic's role is shifted away from being the tipster and toward after-screening rumination, its virtues shine brighter and its influence is more keenly felt? It's worth remembering that the film reviewer who achieved the brightest fame, Pauline Kael, insisted on never seeing a film in advance of release, and while her motive was more to do with watching films with an audience of the public, she was also writing, I would argue, with the reader who had already seen the film in mind. As journals like this one demonstrate, intelligent film writing can be something against which readers test their opinion rather than something they use to bolster their confidence in choosing a film.

But such a move presents problems. Many of my best-loved colleagues now limit their use of subjective judgment in favor of pure advocacy of the neglected corners of international cinema. Indeed one of the consequences of the digital cornucopia is that there are now hundreds of cinephile champions each espousing a different variety of antidote to Hollywood. If you listen to the chorus of serious writers on film, a

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thousand genius flowers would seem to be blooming from Siberia to Lisbon via Newfoundland to Patagonia. My personal difficulty is that a lot of the time I find these claims to be wildly exaggerated. The wonderful golden run of great international cinema in the 1990s that brought us the best of Edward Yang, Wong Kar-wai, Takeshi Kitano, and Abbas Kiarostami, among many others, petered out several years ago. Today's immensely generous and rather awestruck cinephilia needs marginal masterpieces to laud or it cannot function, but this is not a time of great international cinema. And there are many sacred cows at both ends of the funding scale. To pick just two of the most distinguished examples: I dissent from the near-universal hallelujah that greets every new work of Godard's, and I think the cognoscenti cut Clint Eastwood a lot of slack. I don't think we do international cinema a favor when, as film festivals are wont to encourage us to do, we reify minor achievements.

If you listen to the chorus of serious writers on film, a thousand genius flowers would seem to be blooming from Siberia to Lisbon via Newfoundland to Patagonia.

I wonder, though, if my fondness for such subjective sweeping judgments as the one above comes from my own history. Writing about film was never for me a conscious career move. I fell into it through accident and opportunity. I studied art at Saint Martins and Walthamstow and, having, I fear, neither the fascinated rigor and earnestness to become a structuralist Super 8 filmmaker nor the physical hardiness to endure performance-art rituals, I was stuck with painting at a time—the late 1970s—when painting was the least interesting and fashionable fine art activity. But it was a piece of criticism that helped me give up painting: Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* (1975).

That book seems to me now to wear the white suit of patrician philistinism, but at the time Wolfe's argument that any visual art that required one to read explanatory texts to "get" it was a con or a failure was sufficiently convincing to a callow someone whose reluctant painting at the time was literally bound up in tracing big words onto canvasses. Having got my degree, my one performance gesture was to leave my portfolio on a bus, never to be reclaimed. I tend to thank Wolfe rather than curse him for his help, even if I disagree with his sentiments now.

What this convinces me of is that the negative aspects of criticism can be just as energizing as the positive. Wolfe was one of the originators of the so-called "New Journalism," but the nipple at which I had sucked in that phenomenon was that once very popular organ of the neurotic boy outsider, the *New Musical Express*. In retrospect I realize that it was writers like Charles Shaar Murray and Nick Kent, writing in pre-punk days about the huge variety of music of the early 1970s, who gave me my first taste of outlandish and vivid writing about an art form. They prepared me as a reader for the more literary aspects of film criticism. Alongside their myth-building reverence for the music that moved them, they were always prepared to lash out, to write what is known as "knocking copy." Their savagery was just as thrilling to the teenage boy I was as their reverent rhetoric toward their gods.

But the writers who followed in their footsteps at the *NME*—the likes of Paul Morley and Ian Penman as well as the more notorious Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill—had a more direct effect on the music being made: on punk, the new wave, and eventually the new pop of the 1980s. One saw that they were like the *nouvelle vague* film critics in that they had helped create vibrant new forms of their chosen medium. In the 1980s the savage aspect of *NME* culture also took hold of the wider U.K. arts press through Burchill and Parsons. Unfortunately, in the long run, the latter's once-breathtaking iconoclasm ended up bolstering Britain's cultural philistinism rather than sharpening its arts coverage. My own migration from a minor career as a post-art school rock musician into film criticism via *City Limits* magazine happened in that cultural context. This may be why I get twitchy when, in this rather conformist era, iconoclasm is entirely missing from most critical writing.

What I mean by iconoclasm isn't a knee-jerk disdaining of today's equivalents of the *cinéma de papa* (the Oscar nomination lists, say) but rather the tearing down of all things too ordinary in order to put better, more stimulating things in their place. If, as I suggest, that vital new cinema isn't currently burgeoning, critics of fire and energy need to help it develop. For me the current cinephile community is both too solipsistic and too forgiving in its tastes to effect such a change. If that community has seen one arm of its influence weaken—the reviewer's power of influence—it needs to beef up its more considered, less media-instant arm. It needs to get more involved in influencing what's being made through the rude power of polemical engagement, especially with filmmaking itself.

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SEXISM IN THE FRENCH NEW WAVE

One way of looking back at the sense of male privilege underlying much of the French New Wave would be to consider *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974) as a belated commentary on it. I've long regarded that masterpiece as a late-blooming, final flowering of the New Wave, especially for its referentiality in relation to cinephilia and film criticism. For one thing, it glories in the kind of compulsive doubling of shots and characters that François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette himself all discovered in Alfred Hitchcock's movies. But it also puts a kind of stopper on the New Wave in the way it both underlines and responds to that movement's sexism through the services of its four lead actresses, all of whom collaborated on its script: Juliet Berto, Dominique Labourier, Bulle Ogier, and Marie-France Pisier. Every male character, both in the story proper and in the film-with-in-the-film, is viewed as absurd, both as a romantic fop and as a narcissist who ultimately elicits the heroines' scorn and ridicule: the patriarch (Barbet Schroeder) in the *Phantom Ladies over Paris* segments, playing his two phantom ladies (Ogier and Pisier) off against one another; and, in the story proper, Julie's small-town suitor (Philippe Clévenot), Céline's boss (Jean Douchet), and various male customers at the cabaret.

Some of that movie's male fans could laugh at this ridicule and still be slow in recognizing its feminism. As an American expatriate in Paris and London who was friends at the time with Eduardo de Gregorio—the film's only credited male screenwriter apart from Rivette—I could attend many early private screenings of the work print and could interview Rivette along with a couple of friends (Gilbert Adair and Lauren Sedofsky). But I could also write a series of dithyrambic pieces about the movie in the mid-1970s—in *Sight and Sound*, *Film Comment*, and London's *Time Out*—without alluding once to feminism, as Robin Wood would point out in this magazine several years later ("Narrative Pleasure: Two Films of Jacques Rivette," *Film Quarterly*, fall 1981).

I don't think I was hostile to the feminist insights about male entitlement that would emerge with greater force by the 1980s, having already read Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) more sympathetically than defensively in the early 1970s. But feminism had yet to become an everyday fixture in my arsenal of reference points, and the fact that I'd spent the first part of the 1970s in Paris certainly hadn't helped matters much. I can still recall hearing about what may have been the first significant, well-publicized act of the French feminist movement of that era—in August 1970, during my first year abroad, only two years after the May 1968 uprisings—and even then the gesture had seemed pretty archaic: Christianne Rochefort, Monique Wittig, and others placing a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier dedicated to "the unknown wife" of the Unknown Soldier.

No less characteristically, I recall a quarrel I had with a French feminist many years later about the sexism of Rivette's first feature, *Paris Belongs to Us* (1960). Though I could readily concede the misogyny lurking behind the rather artificial character of Terry Yordan (Françoise Prévost)—a noirish bitch goddess, clearly indebted (like much else in the film) to Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)—I maintained that surely one felt a lot of empathy and even identification with Anne (played by Betty Schneider, who'd also appeared in Tati's 1958 *Mon oncle*), the young Sorbonne dropout who's the film central figure and is far more lifelike. I certainly knew that's how I felt when I saw the film for the first time as an NYU freshman, at Cinema 16 circa 1961. To which my interlocutrice replied, indignantly, "Mais elle est moche!"

Terry looms over Anne

Paris Belongs to Us. © AJYM-Films, Les Films du Carrosse. DVD: BFI (U.K.).

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Small-town suitor, ridiculous patriarch

Céline and Julie Go Boating. © 1974 Les Films du Losange. DVD: BFI (U.K.).

("But she's ugly!")—a startling indication of what she evidently considered necessary to both identification and respect. By these standards, it would appear that Emmanuèle Riva in *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), Jeanne Moreau in *Jules and Jim* (1962), and Corinne Marchand in *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962) all owed much of their status as feminist heroines to their credentials as glamorous fashion plates.

And what about A, the glamorous heroine played by Delphine Seyrig in *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961)? A broader part of the critique of Geneviève Sellier's *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, recently published in Kristin Ross's English translation (Duke University Press, 2008), takes on the "masculinist" cult of the male protagonist (in this case, Giorgio Albertazzi) and auteur (Alain Robbe-Grillet)—with the former becoming the designated "alter ego" of the latter—that she associates with the New Wave, as well as the privileging of formal innovation over issues of representation. In both regards, *Last Year at Marienbad* takes on the status of a bad object, being described as "a film that gives an exorbitant privilege to the male protagonist by making him the narrator of a story whose interpretation he imposes at the expense of the female character" (11).

This characterization (not to mention the demonizing of auteurism) sounds more plausible if Robbe-Grillet's screenplay is imposed at the expense of Alain Resnais's direction. But plainly the film owes much of its power to the tug of war between writer and director as well as the struggle between Albertazzi's X and Seyrig's A. Sellier acknowledges that Robbe-Grillet even scripted a rape scene that Resnais refused to film, and T. Jefferson Kline has published a couple of fascinating studies that show Resnais subverting Robbe-Grillet's screenplay and its gender bias in a number of ways, drawing particular attention to the insertion of a pointed reference to Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* via a theater poster—a play involving both female emancipation and incest that Freud analyzed. (The fact that Resnais first encountered Seyrig in New York when she was acting in another Ibsen play, *The Enemy of the People*, is also deemed significant.)

The first of Kline's studies, cited by Sellier, is "Rebecca's Bad Dream: Speculations on/in Resnais's *Marienbad*," a chapter in Kline's *Screening the Text: Intertextuality in New Wave French Cinema* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); the second is Kline's essay, "*Last Year at Marienbad*: High Modern and Postmodern," included in the collection *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, edited by Ted Perry (Indiana University Press, 2006). In the first of these essays, the Rebecca in question is Ibsen's heroine, not Alfred Hitchcock's—although *Rebecca* (1940), and in particular its trancelike opening sequence, could certainly be cited as one of Resnais's key filmic sources. The second essay argues in fascinating detail that Resnais "would produce a film . . . that enacted a high modernist (consciously Freudian) reinterpretation of Alain Robbe-Grillet's postmodern (unconsciously Lacanian) scenario" (209). And in a delirium of interpretation—a kind of activity that *Last Year at Marienbad* in particular seems to provoke—Kline begins his second essay by discussing Goethe's "Marienbad Elegy" and Jacques Lacan's attempt to present his paper on "The Mirror Stage" in Marienbad in 1936 before being silenced by Ernest Jones.

Given Resnais's subtle subversion of Robbe-Grillet's script as well as his insistence on treating Marguerite Duras as an equal creative partner on *Hiroshima, mon amour*, he

Referencing Ibsen, glamorous A

Last Year in Marienbad. © 1960 Studiocanal Image, Argos Films, Cineriz (Rome). DVD: Optimum Releasing (U.K.)

clearly has more credibility from a feminist perspective than most of the other early male directors of the French New Wave. It's worth adding that the recent French DVD of *Hiroshima, mon amour*, lamentably unavailable in North America, reprints letters, clippings, and photographs that were sent by Resnais in Hiroshima to Duras in Paris while he was scouting various locations for the film—which suggest that she may have never traveled to the title city herself and that the film's extraordinary grasp of place, reflecting Resnais's background as a documentary filmmaker, may have been entirely his own, even if he modestly (and characteristically) avoided taking any credit for it.

Part of the problem in figuring out the gender biases of the French New Wave and its audiences is differentiating boys'-club thinking in much of western culture during this period—for example, not just early features by Claude Chabrol and Jean-Luc Godard, but also such Beat manifestos as Kerouac's *On the Road*—from specific French inflections and versions of that mindset. Take, for instance, the rather divisive ambiguity about male privilege and sexual double standards in Agnès Varda's *La Bonheur* (1964), which shows a salt-of-the-earth carpenter (Jean-Claude Drouot) driving his faithful wife (Claire Drouot) to a probable suicide when he starts an affair with a postal worker (Marie-France Boyer), then marrying his lover to help raise his children while continuing to cultivate his kitschy happiness to the strains of Mozart. Varda herself has compared this film to a piece of fruit with a worm inside, but the late English critic Jill Forbes in *The Cinema in France* (Macmillan, 1992), among others, deemed it "unforgivable"—comparing its style to that of "soap powder advertisements" and ruling out the possibility of any ironic subterfuge on Varda's part. A more general problem of identifying Varda too closely with her heroines—the title heroine (Corinne Marchand) of *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), for instance—is sometimes matched by committing the same error regarding Godard's identification with Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in *Breathless* (1959), or Chabrol's with his own boorish heroes. Even if Godard himself would later call *Breathless* "a film that came out of fascism [and is] full of fascist overtones," it would surely be oversimplifying matters to equate him simply with his gangster hero.

Sometimes the inflections are not merely French but 1960s French. Many commentators have persuasively argued that François Truffaut diminished the feminism of Henri-Pierre Roché's novel *Jules and Jim* by combining most of its women characters into a single figure and ascribing many characteristics to that figure that were felt to be "eternally feminine." It might also be maintained that some of the gendered aspects of the French language itself militate against certain feminist precepts. Consider the implicit confusions in the following passage from the novel (in Patrick Evans's translation): "It was not long before Jules, as master of ceremonies, proposed that they abolish once and for all the formalities *Monsieur* and *Mademoiselle* and *Madame* by drinking to brotherhood, *Brüderschaft trinken*, in his favorite wine, and that to avoid the traditional and too obtrusive gesture of linking arms the drinkers should touch feet under the table—which they did." And consider also the ideological confusions of 1960s counterculture that could embrace the bohemian "freedoms" of Truffaut's characters without always examining everything they meant. As John Powers wrote in his liner notes to the Criterion DVD, "Sixties audiences didn't merely see [François Truffaut's] movie; they wanted to live it." What living it might have consisted of is something we're all still figuring out.

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LA RONDE

La Ronde (1950) was Max Ophuls's second adaptation of a play by the Austrian writer Arthur Schnitzler, the first having been *Liebelei* in 1932. Schnitzler's originals are in each case biting satires of the Viennese society of his time, especially its class and sexual hypocrisy. Already by the time Ophuls made his film of *Liebelei* that society no longer existed, destroyed by World War I and the subsequent collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And by the time he made *La Ronde* another part of the "old Vienna" of Schnitzler's *Reigen* had disappeared as well, with the *Anschluss* in 1938 and the destruction of that Viennese Jewry of which Schnitzler himself had been a leading light.

Ophuls's take on this old Vienna is not satirical, like Schnitzler's. Nor did it have to be, given that the world portrayed no longer existed. But it is not nostalgic or sentimental either. Rather, his is a world viewed ironically and from a distance, and one in which the characters play out a destiny already written for them by the author and foretold to the audience. In another Vienna film, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), Lisa's destiny is announced in the famous words spoken in voiceover near the beginning, "By the time you get this letter I may be dead." In *La Ronde* it is the insistent presence of the compère, played by Anton Walbrook, which sets up the characters as apparently little more than puppets destined to perform the cycle of sexual encounters which form the "ronde" of the title. The presence at the beginning and end of the film of a mechanical carrousel is another hint to the spectator of how the ronde is to be completed.

The sexual encounters are ten in number: between a prostitute and a soldier, the soldier and a maid, the maid and the son of her employers, the son and a married woman, the woman and her husband, the husband and a girl he is thinking of setting up as his mistress, the girl and a famous writer, the writer and an actress, the actress and an aristocrat, and finally the aristocrat and the prostitute who had appeared at the beginning. In the original play, which was so scandalous it could not be performed for twenty years, each encounter results in the passing on of a venereal infection (Schnitzler was a doctor), but this additional salacious twist is tactfully not included in the film.

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The ten encounters are very much as in the play (though not so wordy). But Ophuls adds a quite extraordinary framing device. The film opens on a set with a baroque backdrop behind. The compère enters and slowly crosses the set from right to left, with the camera following. As he walks, he passes a small theater stage, and then part of an empty film studio with arc lights, teasingly speculating as to where we might be. Then a backdrop of a cityscape is revealed. "Ah, we are in Vienna," he declares, before exchanging his coat for evening dress, thus establishing the role he will be playing. A twitter of birdsong on the soundtrack enables him to note that it is springtime. The camera movement passes a balustrade and then continues into a street and to a small square with a carrousel, and as the carrousel rotates the figure of the first character, the prostitute (Simone Signoret), appears. Instructed by the compère, she steps off the carrousel and goes in search of the client with whom the ronde will commence. Until the prostitute leaves the scene there have been no cuts, and a single camera movement has carried the spectator through various levels of reality and unreality toward the relative naturalness (though still studio-bound) of the main action.

The first encounter is not auspicious. The soldier (Serge Reggiani) is markedly lacking in enthusiasm. He doesn't like having to pay for sex or to walk any distance to get it. The act takes place off-screen in an archway and he dashes off, ungraciously, to get back to barracks. The second encounter, between the soldier and the maid (Simone Simon), is not much of an advertisement for tender loving relationships either, though it has incidental comedy along the way and the girl does form a certain attachment to her lover. It is with the third encounter that the spectator begins to get a sense of where the narrative is headed, which is up the social scale, and may begin to suspect a certain repetitiveness in the way it is developing. The young man (Daniel Gelin), supposedly studying, rings the bell for the maid; she answers the call and hangs around at the opposite end of the room, neither encouraging nor discouraging the advance which the audience (certainly) and she (probably) knows will come by the time the man plucks up the courage to make it.

Similar but subtler hesitations characterize the next scene. A respectable married woman (Danielle Darrieux) puts herself in a compromising position by visiting the young man in what she suspects is not really his apartment but a garçonnière rented for one purpose only. Hesitation apart,

however, it is hard to avoid the impression that this is a film with a simple, unedifying message. Regardless of class or gender, everybody is alike. Sex is the lowest common denominator. Whoever we are, we are all up for it, and it's only empty social convention or moral scruple that prevents us from recognizing this and acting accordingly.

Once formed, this impression is not easy to shake off and it has unfortunately colored many critical responses to the film. But on closer examination it proves to be quite misleading. The characters are not all alike and are not even looking for the same thing, even if sex is the thing they end up with. Sometimes the motive is sexual desire, sometimes more a desire for adventure. Some crave love, some security, but all are to some extent confused as to what they want. Nor is the outcome always exactly as expected.

The scene with the married woman is a perfect example of this uncertainty. She has many reasons to feel ambivalent about the situation. She moves anxiously around the room, with the camera tracking her movement, as she assesses the options. Finally she makes up her mind and enters the bedroom. There is then a cut to the carrousel. The compère, in one of his many guises, is turning the wheel to keep it going when suddenly it breaks down. When the film returns to the bedroom, Darrieux is lying in the bed in a nightdress (one is tempted to ask where she got it from) and Gelin is sitting up in pajamas, facing away from her. The significance of the cut to the carrousel becomes clear. He is talking about an episode in Stendhal's *De l'amour* in which a group of cavalry officers, discussing their conquests, admit to being impotent with the woman they most desired. "All six of them," asserts the young man, seeking safety in numbers from his pain and embarrassment. She queries this, but with a skepticism that is as tender as it is mocking. He is clearly reassured, because a moment or two later we return to the carrousel, which the compère has just fixed. The ronde continues. Going out into the street, the young man declares, "I am now the lover of a married woman."

Sometimes the motive is sexual desire, sometimes more a desire for adventure. Some crave love, some security, but all are to some extent confused as to what they want.

The whole scene, with its baroque framings (the lovers in bed are separated by a curved diagonal drape) and its changes of tone, is Ophuls at is most extravagant and exquisite—greatly helped by an extraordinary performance from Darrieux in which every psychological subtlety seems to be conveyed solely by the arch of her eyebrows. This is, quite definitely, a woman in love, in the grips of a passion which she cannot explain to herself but about which she retains a piercing lucidity. Like many Ophuls heroines, she is a risk-taker, though on this occasion the risk-taking will not have tragic consequences.

The Darrieux character, Emma, now returns to her husband and it becomes clear why she has been tempted to betray him. As they lie in their single beds (viewed frontally, with an ornate clock in the foreground marking their physical separation), he lectures her on the perils of even associating with adulterous women. With the same delicate irony with which she had quizzed the young man, she asks him whether he has ever known any such women, and how intimately. This he evidently finds sexually exciting and the compère is obliged to intervene again, this time in the guise of a censor, removing from a piece of film negative the scene that is about to take place before our eyes. Here, in its portrayal of the sexual double standard, the film is close to both the letter and the spirit of Schnitzler's original (even the small detail of having her called Emma and him Charles, like Emma and Charles Bovary, is derived from the play) and the same is true of the next scene, where the husband takes a compliant young woman to a private room in a restaurant (shades of *Letter from an Unknown Woman*) with a proposition to make to her. Even so, Ophuls's irony is not the same as Schnitzler's. There is a tenderness toward the characters, especially the women, and their tendency to make wrong choices, which is hard to derive from Schnitzler's text.

From now on, however, the film loses momentum. The remaining characters are unworthy of the tenderness Ophuls has expended on their more modest predecessors. The poet (Jean-Louis Barrault), the actress (Isa Miranda), and the aristocrat (Gérard Philipe) are trapped in the artifice of their roles and the acting is artificial to match. It is only with the final encounter that the film recovers its poise. The aristocrat is drunk—too drunk to remember what, if anything, happened between him and the prostitute. This is lowest-common-denominator sex with a vengeance but redeemed by the dignity with which Signoret invests the scene. The ronde is complete. It is not clear whether there is a moral to the story or not. It is possible to see the action of the film as ending in squalor, as it had begun, but my reading of the film is upbeat. A lot has gone on which maybe should not have gone on, but nobody in the film—except perhaps the husband—has any real reason to feel ashamed.

Ophuls gives the film a final twist. On his way home the aristocrat walks past the balustrade we saw in the opening

EMMA'S BEDROOM DIALOGUES

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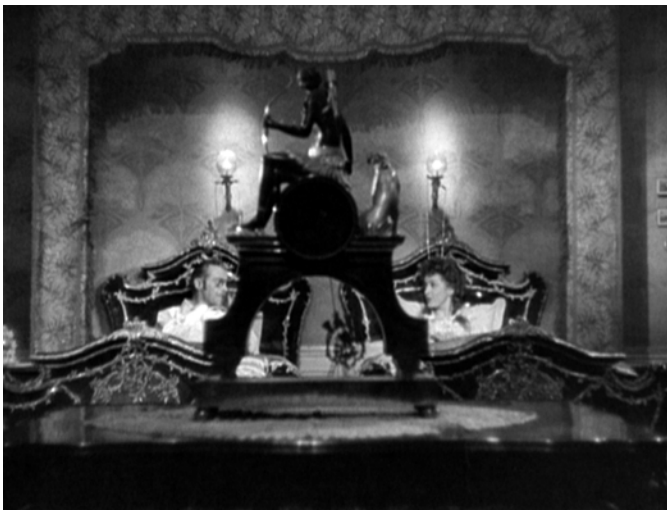

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shot. The soldier from the first encounter passes him. The compère appears and berates him for not saluting a superior officer. The camera swings back as if to take a last look at the characters. There is then a dissolve which opens up on a still image of the square with the carrousel, closed down for the season. The trees are bare. The ending originally planned by Ophuls and his scriptwriter Jacques Natanson was different. The camera movement would have reached the square and the carrousel would rotate, with the characters on it. It would have been a theatrical ending, returning the spectator to the artifice with which the film began. Instead we have exchanged the theater for a cold autumnal dawn.

The Criterion DVD, as one would expect, is immaculate, with a clear soundtrack (the birdsong is audible which it rarely seems to be on VHS or 16mm). For British viewers there also exists a region 2 DVD from Second Sight, which is nearly as good, does not have extras such as a commentary, and is cheaper.

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DVD DATA *La Ronde.* Director: Max Ophuls. © 1950 Cofradis. Publisher: Criterion Collection, 2008. $39.95, 1 disc.

LA RONDE

I

The Whore fucks the Soldier, the Soldier fucks the Maid, the Maid fucks the Young Master, and so on until, to end the rigmarole, the Count fucks the Whore, and what seemed to be an interminable line warps into an all-encompassing circle: that is the memorable structure of Arthur Schnitzler's *Reigen* ("Round Dance"). Everywhere you turn, the same unsavory little story: the triumph of the sex drive, whose blunt insistence destroys its idealization as love. Copulation organizes each episode; a *double* copulation organizes the series. Though men want one thing only, they never want it from the same woman, and vice versa; the dance obliges everyone to change partners. In this unsparingly disenchanted vision, copulation even lacks discernible purpose. The characters don't seem to *have* sex so much as sex *has them*, using them parasitically as host-environments for its reproduction. Not that such reproduction is tied to procreation, or the "passing of the sperm," as David Thomson believes; *Reigen* repeatedly confronts the facts of life, but hardly once mentions the making of babies that the facts of life are normally brought forward to explain. Stripped of its halos, alibis, and consequences, sex would constitute a cruel, if pleasurable, formalism whose sole principle is sex for sex's sake. And with the closing of the circle, the final surprising, yet not unexpected, match of high and low, such urgent but empty and gratuitous sex seems a universal fate.

In all likelihood, the outrage caused by *Reigen*'s first performance owed less to the on-stage acknowledgment of sex than to the *idea* of sex that it demonstrated—namely, the idea of sex as an insult, an insult to all the social, psychological, and biological moralisms with which we normally domesticate it. But the turns of sexual history have visited a strange fate on *Reigen*. As the play's shocking para-Freudian propositions about sex have succeeded in becoming *idées reçues*, its arena of permissiveness must now strike us as much less unruly, and far more circumscribed, than it once did. Tellingly, the play recognizes impotence, but not perversion; sex here has no other form but the textbook Fuck, the primal act whose commission confers on a Man and a Woman their profound and indeed only truth. Anything else is not even foreplay; it is just bad faith. So tightly wound is *Reigen* around the heterosexual couple's doing what comes naturally that the narrative, far from scandalous now, looks like a manual of normativity, a canned celebration of "classic sex." In the course of one too many sexual revolutions, *Reigen* has reeled over to the *ancien régime*.

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II

It is the first merit, then, of Ophuls's *La Ronde* to have understood this basic problem facing cinematic adaptation of *Reigen*. Even in 1950, when the film was being shot, Schnitzler's material had ceased to be obscene; indeed, it was already in the dismal condition of *what used to be sexy*. Ophuls develops *La Ronde*'s great poetry not around desire, therefore, but around the anhedonia of a world in which desire survives only as an antique sign of itself, a memorial tombstone laid over its grave. He supplements the even pairs of Schnitzler's round dance with a singleton: a man of the world, mature and wise, so discreet and doleful and correctly dressed that, though he is ostensibly brought in to serve as a master of ceremonies, to "animate" the ronde, he might equally pass for an undertaker, come to lay it out properly. In whichever role, this *meneur de jeu* (Anton Walbrook), as critical tradition calls him, announces episodes, assigns partners, facilitates rendez-vous, and forestalls catastrophes; as an emblem of this labor, he is often shown running—and on one occasion repairing—a small, decoratively sluggish merry-go-round.

The addition of an uncompanioned auxiliary transforms the Schnitzlerian ethos completely. *Reigen*'s dance had seemed to proceed with perfect spontaneity, the natural expression of a sex drive that flowed as abundantly as a river in spate; *La Ronde*'s merry-go-round has become a bit of a grind, requiring the MJ's continual maintenance to keep its wheels greased and turning. It has also now become the object of his gaze, which, however fascinated by—and even necessary to—its operations, can never wholly disappear into them; he is typically shown observing the battle of the sexes with eyes askant and head slightly cocked. The emphasis on his off-angled vantage comes as early as the opening shot sequence, in which, after introducing himself, he suggestively passes a theater stage and a movie set to enter what he identifies as "Vienna, 1900," and where, changing into a tailcoat,

he proceeds to the merry-go-round and sets it going. This famously long take is linear, a not unimportant first fact in a film called *La Ronde* (always misremembered for the circular camera movements of which it in fact contains practically none); still more significantly, this line touches the carrousel only tangentially, insisting on the MJ's spatial as well as temporal remove. The shot so often adduced as our serpentine induction into a waltz-like erotic whirl puts us strictly on the sidelines.

Viewed from there, the ronde becomes sad as an elegy and boring as a rerun. In turn-of-the-century Vienna, where *Reigen* was written as well as set, its scandalous sexual vignettes had an aggressive contemporary character, and their "degeneracy" qualified them even better as the last word in modernity. In *La Ronde*, this Vienna offers no more than a quaint sexual mythology, a rococo love hotel that features champagne suppers in *cabinets particuliers* and canopied beds with Stendhal's *De l'amour* gracing the nightstands. "I adore the past," says the MJ, "it's so much more restful than the present and so much more certain than the future." Certain and restful: desiderata for a good night's sleep, no doubt, but hardly a practicable recipe for the other thing people do in bed. And if the opening long take does not perform the circular motion attributed to it, the film's indisputable on-screen rotations—the carrousel, a Ferris wheel, a revolving door, a waltzing couple, and even a pair of bicycles—protest too much with their naughty insinuation of "screwing"; they more successfully convey the reassuring calm of nicely regulated clockwork. In less time than it takes for Oscar Straus's theme waltz to become an ineradicable earworm—that is to say: on the very instant of their first presentation—the episodes and characters have "turned" in a quite different sense: they have curdled into stereotypes. Not even the "illicit" character of most of the episodes can kick them up; this is nothing but the *sanctioned illicit* of the nineteenth-century bourgeois order, already fully codified in its literature, where the only thing more "correct" than a young master initiating himself with the chambermaid is that, in later life, when he has become a *père de famille*, he keep a young mistress on the side.

Small wonder that we chuckle complacently when the camera cuts from a nascent sex scene between the Actress (Isa Miranda) and the Count (Gérard Philipe) to a shot of the MJ, with celluloid and scissors, supposedly editing out of the film the couple's further progress. Not at all aroused by the sex scene in the first place, we don't feel in the least cheated when it is truncated. The act of censorship only tells us, of palpable eroticism, how little there would ever be to censor in *La Ronde*. But though this sequence does not sexually excite or frustrate us, it does do something for which our biddable laughter offers thanks: it flatters our sexual sophistication.

Such would appear to be the second labor of the MJ: to be *knowing* and to spread his knowingness around: not so much to the characters whom he advises and consoles, but who remain rather dense about it all, as to the spectators whom he invites to imitate him and the critics who—see Terence Rafferty's super-suave essay in the Criterion booklet—are generally happy to parade their own similarly melancholy *savoir vivre*. The MJ introduces himself to us thus: "I am the incarnation of your desire . . . your desire to know everything." His self-correction, moving us from our desire to a desire to know everything about it, identifies a sour project that we hear very little about in criticism of *La Ronde*: to replace erotic experience with that "experienced" attitude toward it that is in fact its depressive antithesis. Yet with erotic experience overfamiliarized from the start, how could we ever *not* be knowing about it? The MJ's knowingness is too easy not to be facile, less the fruit of experience than its evasion; it refuses to recognize the underlying sexual numbness—his, theirs, ours—that it rationalizes and extends. As a result, his sophisticated *répliques* seem hardly distinguishable from the hackneyed desire he purports to know all too well.

III

Yet despite his claim that *La Ronde* is "everyone's story," it's manifestly not *his*. To the Prostitute (Simone Signoret) coming on to him, he says, "There must be some mistake, Madame. I'm not part of the game. I run the ronde." From this ostensibly universal structure, its own managing director has been excluded. The contradiction is never seen as one; but how does something so obvious, so flatly stated, get to pass for invisible? Partly because Author (or Director) and Character are felt to occupy distinct worlds, with different laws applying—and partly owing to the reinforcing distinction between Desire, felt by the blinkered characters who ride the ronde, and Knowledge, distilled in the celibate MJ who runs it. But the wit of Ophuls's conceit depends on the constant *breaching* of levels between the story and its framing; the MJ is pictured now as part of the story being filmed (a coachman, a waiter, a neighbor), now as part of its filming, with scissors or clapboard in hand. And however flat the ronde's erotics, they elicit from him a performance so overflowing with animation, anxiety, invention, and ruse, that no

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word *but* desire can describe the oddity of its excess. Indeed, this is the only desire in the film that is cut fresh off the bone. It is accounted for neither in terms of the desire circulating *on* the carrousel, which the MJ doesn't share, nor by the knowledge circulating *about* the carrousel, which comprehends everyone's desire but his own. In the glib machinery of *La Ronde*, the MJ is the loose screw.

But you would never know this from the scholarly commentaries produced for the Criterion edition, which allow the MJ no space as a desiring being, with a sexual center or even an erotic surface. Susan White observes that a man and a woman who have made love are "reduced to the essentials of their species," while in a similar spirit, Alan Williams, the other authorized talker, remarks that the symmetries of Ophuls's style are "structured on gender roles" (as if these were symmetrical!). And by commissioning this pairing of Williams and White, by conjoining them like one more "symmetrical" and essentialized couple on the carrousel, Criterion would assure us that the treatment of sexuality in the film is balanced and, so to speak, well-rounded.

Amid such unseeing hetero-narcissism, one must be grateful for the openly homophobic joke that Daniel Gélin tells about Walbrook in a 1989 interview reissued among the supplements:

> The Friday or Saturday before filming was to begin on Monday, Max went to see Anton. They'd known each other for ages. He said, "I don't know how to say this. It's quite awkward. Anyway, you know what I mean. You don't really like women. You're more attracted to. . ." Anton said, "I understand. You're afraid I'll look too queer. Just say it!" Ophuls says, "yes, that's it!" Anton says, "It's very simple. During rehearsals and shooting, if I forget to act 'manly', you and I will simply agree on a code. The moment you think it's too apparent, that my [Gélin stumbles on the next word, as if it were a tongue-twister—or a potential confession] homosexuality is too obvious, just cough and I'll understand." The weekend passed and Anton shot his scenes, but he sort of forgot. And there were moments where it was clear as day [Gélin laughs]. Max began quietly coughing. [Gélin coughs in imitation]. But Anton kept right on, he had forgotten their signal. Max's coughs got louder, but Anton went right on. [Gélin coughs louder] Finally. Anton, who'd completely forgotten, goes up to him and asks, "What's wrong, Max? Coming down with a cold?" [Laughter to indicate the story is over; the interview too has concluded.]

This anecdote is illustrated with clips from Walbrook's performance: moments that we are thus invited to read as exemplifying those blatant homosexual lapses, those obvious but self-oblivious revelations that reduced poor Max to coughing and now ask us to share Gélin's laughter. "Who am I? People never know more than a piece of reality; why? Because they see only one side of things"; these words, though scripted by Ophuls, now seem to lay bare the actor's sexual orientation, as if literally exposing his behind. And when, to show that he sees things "from all sides, in the round," Walbrook waves a circle in the air with his overlimber wrist, throwing an appraising glance at his fingernails, we seem to have caught him in the act of making the classic homosexual slip.

A nasty, irresponsible, and untrustworthy air hangs over this interview segment. But over the better-behaved commentary, with its sins of omission only, it has the advantage of showing that the MJ's exclusion from the sexuality of the ronde is not the same thing as exclusion from sexuality. For who is not immediately convinced by Walbrook's swish hand—or by a whole archipelago of such moments that, on this hint, we may readily discover extending all through his performance—of the existence of a different MJ from the one we have been narrowly allowed to know? This new MJ is not the regretful Spirit of Sex Past haunting the antique carrousel; nor is he the arch sophisticate who, like you, knows everything about sex and feels nothing; he is instead an incorrigible queen, whose superrefinement—however cleverly it embellishes the heterosexual circuit—betrays the bad form of his sexual eccentricity.

That Walbrook should appear to "forget his manhood" is, whatever else, the inevitable effect of his structural position in *La Ronde*; and had Gélin assumed the role, he too would have leaked suspicious signs of one sort or another. In *Reigen*, of course, there could *be* no perversion; nothing else existed but the Fucking Heterosexual Couple. But in *La Ronde*, this dyad requires for its unity an excluded third, who, unmatched with any partner, must seem (once we see him as at all sexual) to represent perversion in its purest form. Yet let's not mince our mincer: while others might play heterosexuality's excluded third (the spinster, the celibate, the "dirty" old man, the pedophile, even the child), for whom but the homosexual is this the role of a lifetime?

Look again at the celebrated shot in which the carrousel spins in one direction while a couple waltzing in the foreground (Danielle Darrieux as the Young Wife and Gélin as

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the Young Master) turns in the other; the camera slowly moves sideways, once again in tangent to the ronde, and then approaches Walbrook, shown from a low angle looking on. Superficially, the contrast is between the couple's fluent movement and his upright rigidity; but if you look more closely, you will see that the waltzers are not really moving at all; they are being rotated mechanically on a platform, and even their conversation is obviously faked "business." By contrast, Walbrook's apparent inertness proves to be the restraint of a magnificent economy of action. He has been holding up a cane, which he lets drop with perfect timing just as he also drops the dampening news that the lovely Young Wife is about to sleep with . . . her Husband (Fernand Gravey). And in the grain of his cryptic expression, variously eager, tired, absorbed, indifferent, aloof, resigned, you may read a whole unwritten volume of twentieth-century sexual history. This is the bright-eyed/indrawn face of one who must enliven the ronde with his wit and taste, but remain on its perimeter, excluded from participation; the fascinated/bored look of one who must always be *just* looking, whose erotic options are restricted by the ronde to self-monitoring narcissism or servile voyeurism; the commanding/cowed attitude of one who takes vengence on the ronde with his *irony*, half spiteful, half serene, and refuge from it in his impeccable, or embarrassing, but in any case unassimilable *style*. It will always seem reductive to see the MJ, through Walbrook's performance, as "gay." But how much more reductive *not* to see it, to see only the ronde instead of *La Ronde*.

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DVD DATA *La Ronde.* Director: Max Ophuls. © 1950 Cofradis. Publisher: Criterion Collection, 2008. $39.95, 1 disc.

AMERICAN HEROES

J. M. TYREE ON FRIVOLITY AND HORROR IN 2008'S SUMMER SUPERHERO MOVIES: *THE DARK KNIGHT, THE INCREDIBLE HULK,* AND *IRON MAN*

Movies and comic books have always had a sense of kinship. At least this is the impression generated by the animated production logo of Marvel Studios, whose comic-book frames suddenly burst into life and motion through the magic of an imaginary flipbook that becomes a film reel. Of course, these two art forms also have fundamental dissimilarities, not least of which lies in the comic book's hybrid of images and text. This almost hieroglyphic style of composition blends simultaneous sources of information—the reader decides what to absorb first. The comic book's unusual way of being in apparent motion yet simultaneously still has a curious way of swallowing time, whole afternoons, entire childhoods.

In recent years, the craze for comic books and graphic novels has reached a fever pitch, and it has also gone highbrow, including filmed versions of Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* (2003) and Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World* (2001). Contemporary novels such as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Michael Chabon), *The Fortress of Solitude* (Jonathan Lethem), and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Junot Diaz) have also contained a mix of homage, nostalgia, spoof, and allusion to comic books, treating them almost as an alternate canon of American literature. Two of these three books won Pulitzer Prizes. *The New Yorker* has even skewered the current fad with a cartoon. "You mean I have to pretend to like graphic novels now, too?" a husband complains to his wife.

The frenzy of comic-book movies unleashed by Hollywood in 2008, then, was nothing new, yet the box-office receipts for these films were staggering. *Iron Man* brought in $100 million during its opening weekend and was not the biggest movie of the summer. That honor went to *The Dark Knight*, which broke the record previously held by *Spider-Man 3* (2007). Marvel released *The Incredible Hulk* too, and July 2008 also saw the appearance of *Hancock*, a subversive mockery of the entire superhero genre, as well as the second installment of Dark Horse's witty *Hellboy* franchise, *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, directed by fantasy master Guillermo del Toro. There were so many heroes around, in fact, that one might wonder how the criminal element manages to thrive at all. Unless the answer, as Heath Ledger's Joker suggests near the end of *The Dark Knight*, is that the hero and the villain require each other completely, so that one cannot exist without the other, and the cycle of escalating acts of good and evil is a perpetual motion machine set to continue for all eternity, or at least a substantial run of sequels and spin-offs.

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Iron Man and *The Incredible Hulk* are molded after a structure proven to last. A thinking person is made grumpy by the plain fact that both films have essentially the same story as *Spider-Man 3*, with variations in characters and plotlines. In all three films, the hero must confront and vanquish an identical—but evil—version of himself in order both to survive and to save the world from severe property damage. Both *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* start in foreign countries—Afghanistan and Brazil, respectively—and both involve the runaway destruction unleashed by new weapons technology. The difference is that while Iron Man has an artificial, self-designed flying exoskeleton, The Hulk has been created with toxic injections. Blueprints, soldering irons, and welding in one case; tubes, syringes, and lab work in the other.

The standard line is that digital filmmaking technology is finally ready to handle the Marvel characters, who often have something deeply wrong with their bodies, without resulting in films that look ridiculous and fake. Certainly the commercial success of the Marvel films owes much to their quality of construction. The special effects, personnel, production design, editing, directing, and acting are all tops. In the male leads for the three films, Tobey McGuire (*Spider Man*), Robert Downey Jr. (*Iron Man*), and Edward Norton (*The Incredible Hulk*), the studio chose wisely by using off-

Lethal eyes

Left: *Iron Man*. © 2008 MVL Film Finance LLC. DVD: Paramount. Right: *The Dark Knight*. © 2008 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. DVD: Warner Home Video.

beat heartthrobs rather than the lurking hunks one might normally expect in a blast-'em-up superhero role. The common thread between the actors is an ability to be soft-looking. In *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, this counterintuitive casting extends to the villains, played by two men, Jeff Bridges and William Hurt, who do not exactly exude threatening vibes. In their choice of directors—Jon Favreau (*Elf*, 2003) for *Iron Man* and Louis Leterrier (*Danny the Dog*, 2005) for *The Incredible Hulk*—Marvel also opted for style by mainstream standards.

Of the two films, *Iron Man* is superior because of its sense of humor about itself—the touchstone of Favreau's previous work, from the script for *Swingers* (1996) to the brilliant mob comedy *Made* (2001). Millionaire playboy and weapons dealer Tony Stark opens *Iron Man* enjoying a cocktail in a Humvee on his way to a weapons demonstration in Afghanistan, while AC/DC's "Back in Black" booms on the stereo. This "merchant of death" is unleashing a new missile called the Jericho, saying, in pure Downey Jr. deadpan, "I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once . . . That's how dad did it, that's how America did it, and so far it's worked out pretty well." Instead, Stark falls prey to a terrorist ambush and kidnapping and is knocked senseless by a bomb etched with his own company logo. The terrorist camp is littered with Stark merchandise. Stark must design himself an artificial heart and an iron suit to escape from the baddies, who are actually in cahoots with Stark Industries, "double dealing under the table" to sell advanced weapons to the no-good-niks.

Stark is genially sexist in the supposedly harmless "retro" mode of a boarding-school lad. "I'm not the hero type," he murmurs at one point. He comments on the quality "bone structure" of a female soldier in the opening scene, and he can make the stewardesses on his private jet move easily from serving drinks to servicing a stripper's pole. Stark's personal assistant and potential love interest, Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow), however, continually saves Stark's skin, thus undermining his chauvinist quirks and performing most of the key acts of heroism. Early on, the pair discuss the merits of a Jackson Pollock painting Stark is thinking of acquiring. He doesn't know what he's talking about, she embarrasses him, and he ends the matter by saying: "Buy it. Store it." Downey Jr. is brilliantly cast: the American Male as devilishly charming but irresponsible boy. He's the tech-nerd version of Peter Pan, and derives his pleasures from 3D robotics imagery and the jokes of lab rats and engineers. "Yeah, I can fly," he comments after soldering together his trademark suit. At its core, the movie is really about the very simple but powerful wish-fulfillment of flight: hovering and zipping around the Santa Monica pier and other Los Angeles environs. Plotwise, Stark reinvents himself as Iron Man after his conversion experience against the military-industrial complex. He uses the suit to hunt down and destroy weapons he's designed that have made their way into the wrong hands.

The subtly inverted gender dynamics of *Iron Man* remind one that comics are really the straight male version of the pleasures of retro, camp, and kitsch. Susan Daitch's novel *The Colorist*, was ahead of its time in its skepticism about this. Published in 1989, it features a character who colors the panels but cannot alter the story of "Electra," a "dream warrior" whose "carapace of bravado scarcely covered conventional femininity. There were more male power figures in the serial than you could shake a stick at. Sometimes they bailed her out; if not, they were there just in case." It's fair to say that *Iron Man* both exploits and teases the kind of male sentimentality Daitch sent up.

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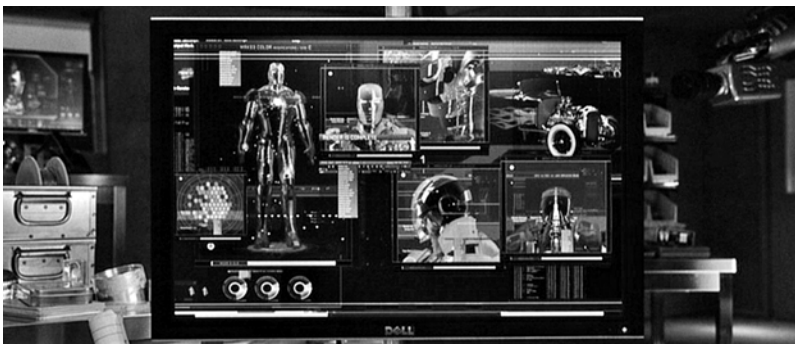
Iron Man's wit is not evident in *The Incredible Hulk*. During its opening sequences in the color-saturated favelas of Rio, director Leterrier seems to have been more interested in making a sequel to *City of God* (2002) than in the splashy CGI-fest to come. Stark weapons are shown in the brilliantly edited credits sequence of *The Incredible Hulk*. Like its twin-brother film, *The Incredible Hulk* is also a teenage-friendly

DRUGS VS. GADGETS



Left: *The Incredible Hulk*. © MVL Film Finance LLC. DVD: Universal Studios. Right: *Iron Man*. © 2008 MVL Film Finance LLC. DVD: Paramount.

parable about the dangers of the military-industrial complex gone mad. Norton's Bruce Banner poisons himself on gamma radiation during a botched medical experiment. Only Hurt's General Thaddeus Ross knows of a secret army plan to make Banner's research into a military application for "biotech force enhancement." So-called "super-soldiers" have been in the works for decades. The program is reignited by the general's search for Banner, led by a "Russian born, English educated" (never a good sign) baddie, played by Tim Roth, who announces "a whole new level of weird" during his physical re-engineering as a rival super-being. Yet the resultant Abomination, a larger, meaner, uglier, Hulk-like creature, somehow cannot vanquish The Hulk.

Marvel's cookie-cutter Manichean story structures, with their repeated final battle scenes between protagonist and nemesis, are really prequels to the profitable videogames based upon the films. This Masterplots approach also calls to mind the mocking comments made about "The Wrestling Picture" genre in the Coen brothers' film *Barton Fink* (1991): "There's a good wrestler and a bad wrestler whom he confronts at the end. In between the good wrestler has a love interest . . ." In *The Incredible Hulk*'s best sequences, Banner and his love interest, Dr. Elizabeth Ross (Liv Tyler), display a physical intimacy of small gestures and looks, from a moment when she slides her foot over his, to a *Beauty and the Beast*/*King Kong* moment when Ross tames and cares for the raging, confused Hulk in a cave during a thunderstorm. By contrast, *Iron Man* accepts its own juvenility and revels in a semi-spoofed version of the genre, thereby expanding its audience beyond the demographic of fifteen-year-old boys who want to have sex with their cars.

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The perennial nature of the Batman story remains remarkable; it appears to be a kind of ever-adaptable contemporary myth series. Tim Burton's 1989 version, with Michael Keaton, Jack Nicholson, and Kim Basinger, remains in living memory, although surely not for the target audience. For its title and arguably some of its bleak tone, but not its plot, *The Dark Knight* hearkens back to Frank Miller's groundbreaking and futuristic 1986 graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, which among other things brilliantly recast Robin as a teenage girl.

Christopher Nolan's previous installment, *Batman Begins*, took a meandering turn down memory lane to the primal scenes of Bruce Wayne's childhood as well as his (exhaustingly detailed) training in martial arts at the hands of an organization led by Henri Ducard (Liam Neeson) called The League of Shadows, who appear to be a cross between a group of Tibetan (sic) ninjas and an Al Qaeda-like terrorist organization dedicated to destroying a succession of historical empires when they became too "decadent." *Batman Begins* also took up the intriguing material of the doings at the Arkham Asylum, perhaps inspired in part by the 1989 graphic novel *Batman: Arkham Asylum* by Grant Morrison and Dave McKean. Certainly the unrelenting nightmare atmosphere in Nolan's films bears some comparison with the Lovecraftian Arkham created by Morrison and McKean. In *Batman Begins*, Nolan chose as co-villain one of the unexploited figures in the filmed versions of *Batman*, Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy), who dumps nightmare hallucinogens into Gotham's water supply. This bioterrorist attack unleashes "fear itself," causing people to see one another as monsters and tear the city apart. The Joker's advent is hinted at near the very end of the first film, when Detective Jim Gordon (Gary Oldham) hands Batman a playing card and the caped crusader promises he'll "look into it." By the end of *Batman Begins*, the hero has destroyed his own mansion as well as the Batcave in order to save the city; when *The Dark Knight* opens, Batman is still living in an apartment and has tech wizard Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) running his base of operations in what looks like a very large multi-storey parking garage. While *Batman Begins* dwells in back-story and preamble, *The Dark Knight* does not admit a single break in its pacing: the second film has virtually no back-story and the attentive viewer will not recall a single sustained flashback.

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The differences between the old and new Batman films have as much to do with the portrayal of The Joker as with Batman himself. For his earlier movie, Burton gave Nicholson's Joker the explanation of his disfigurement pioneered in Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's 1988 graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke*, in which the arch-villain falls into a chemical plant after a botched heist. By contrast, and characteristic of Nolan's entire approach to the Batman story, Heath Ledger's incarnation mocks a series of victims throughout the film with bogus explanations of "how I got my scars." By the end, one feels that he did it to himself to scare people, but we'll never know, and in this case his clownish greasepaint, mottled and half worn-away by sweat in the heat of battle, is at least as frightening as his actual disfigurement. It may have been necessary to do something new with The Joker, but this superb choice and Ledger's performance in general, whether he appears in drag as a hospital-bombing nurse (complete with wig) or slicks back his hair when approaching a frightened woman—return the story to a more secular and less supernatural vision of evil. It's also a fairly pointed mockery of the need for back-stories for villains in the first place, the easy psychoanalysis that reduces every choice to an after-effect of

some early trauma. Actually, it is precisely for this reason that Bruce Wayne, who is controlled at his core by his back-story (his parents' murder, an encounter with bats, etc.), is less intriguing than The Joker.

Much has been made of Ledger's final performance as The Joker, and deservedly so. In the opening scene, he masterminds a mob bank robbery using a variety of accomplices who conveniently dispatch each other during the commission of the crime in a cascading practical joke comprised of mass murder. Near the end of the film, he sleds down a mountain of cash and then burns it. What The Joker wants has been *the* question of the contemporary Batman story. The answer proposed by Nolan's film comes through Ledger's terrifyingly intimate Midwest deadpan twang (critics noted that he sounded a bit like the presumptive senator from Minnesota, Al Franken). The Joker's first appearance involves a terrible pun on Nietzsche: "What doesn't kill you makes you stranger." By the end of the film he is theorizing on the death of humanity, claiming that "I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve." "I just do things," he says. "Guns are too quick—you can't savor all the little emotions." A few of his favorite things? "Dynamite, gunpowder, and gasoline—you know what they have in common? They're cheap." The Joker emphasizes his desire to have a relationship with Batman, asking aptly, "What would I do without you?" (He also travesties the 1996 romantic melodrama *Jerry Maguire* by quoting its often-parodied line to his arch-foe: "You complete me.") The suggestion that The Joker wants to impress Batman, that he is a little in love with him (another idea explored in *The Killing Joke*), is as compelling an explanation as any.

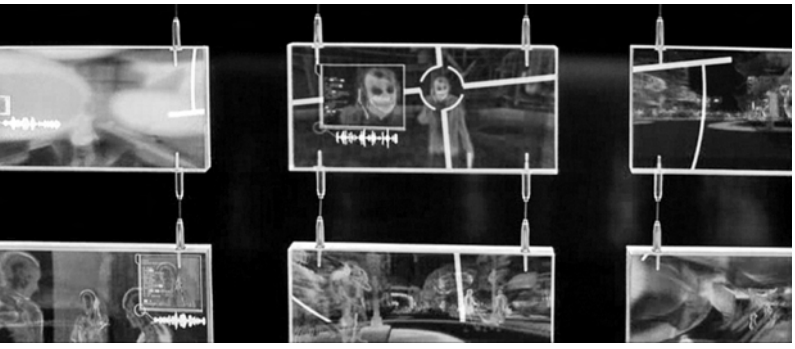
Although he is caught, The Joker has weirdly triumphed by the end of *The Dark Knight*. Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), Batman's childhood sweetheart, has been murdered; Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), Gotham's district attorney and "White Knight," lies dead, disfigured, and disgraced; and Batman is fleeing Gotham, a failure being hunted down by the city he's saved from mere anarchy. The Joker's key failure involves a compelling and memorable sequence in which he conducts a sociological "experiment," attempting to get two boatloads of passengers on two Staten Island Ferries to blow each other up. Both boats are wired with explosives, but one boat can save itself by detonating the other; if neither boat acts within a certain time frame, both will be destroyed. Common decency prevails against the odds and fellow feeling overcomes terror, one of few optimistic points in the entire movie.

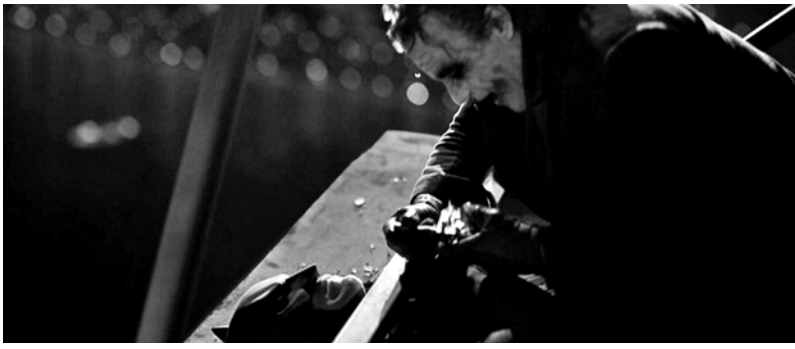
A keynote of the Batman story has always been its vision of Gotham as a corrupt, crime-riddled, mob-run Sodom, dirty and almost worthless, but also fragile and deserving of protection. Although this idea resonates more with New York's past than its present, Nolan has made a new adaptation to the legend in presenting his Batman movies as oblique but fairly transparent fables of counter-terrorism. Residents of New York may recognize that in *The Dark Knight* an assassination attempt on the mayor's life is set in the real-life backdrop of streets near the former site of the World Trade Center. Footage of police marching in a parade nearby looks eerily similar to the annual ceremonies that mark the anniversary of September 11. When, in the film, cops scatter on these streets, when firefighters hose down the rubble of a destroyed building, and when a roadblock in Midtown includes a burning fire truck, these cues add up to a running sidebar. ("Should we give in to this terrorist's demands? / No more dead cops!") It's emphasized that one cannot negotiate with The Joker.

Even the topical question of warrantless surveillance is taken up when Batman invents a method for finding The Joker using a sonar map of every square inch of the city—"spying on thirty million people." In dealing with men who simply "want to watch the world burn," neither the rule of law nor the vigilante justice doled out by the Dark Knight feel very satisfying. In one sequence, Batman stays Dent's hand as he embarks on enhanced interrogation; in another, the film stretches PG-13 violence to the limit when Batman brutalizes The Joker in a police holding cell and breaks the legs of a mobster by dropping him off a building. In still another scene, The Joker, who's "got no rules," explicitly comments on the worthlessness of "all the little rules" of civil society. (Meanwhile, a mobster complains that "criminals in this town used to believe in things.") Finally, the Roman suspension of democracy is brought up, in case anyone missed the Big Point being made.

After their torture session, The Joker, completely unfazed, reveals that Batman will have to choose between the lives of his oldest friend, Rachel, and Dent, Gotham's potential savior. In the end, although The Joker is captured, it seems cold comfort in a film where the love interest is blown up, Dent is transformed into the monster Two Face, and Batman exits the film accused of the murders Dent has committed after going berserk, so that the city can retain its heroic picture of the D.A. "I'm not a hero," Batman keeps repeating throughout the movie, while Dent's self-fulfilling prophecy, parroted by Batman near the end, is that "You either die a hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain." This notion seems acquiescent to The Joker's victory, in moral terms. Alfred (Michael Caine) offers a different interpretation, however, when he suggests that Batman can be "more than a hero" by accepting the hatred of the world for a

FACES OF THE JOKER





The Dark Knight. © 2008 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. DVD: Warner Home Video.

crime he didn't commit. Is this the triumph of the martyr, a prelude to later redemption?

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The summer Marvel films self-presented as uncomplicated, harmless fun, while *The Dark Knight* arrived freighted with political and social resonances. One can expect papers on Batman and the counter-terrorism policies of the second Bush administration to turn up at academic conferences that used to feature panels on Buffy and Harry Potter. *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* also take aim at a military-industrial complex depicted as monstrous, steroidal, malevolent, and out of control. But *Iron Man* plays politics for laughs, and that is where its own fun lies: it pre-interprets itself as frivolous entertainment and it does not try to be anything more. *The Dark Knight*'s self-seriousness, as well as its authentically haunting connection to the uncanny, could not be more different. That the American public received both films ecstatically in the summer of 2008 while it funded two wars seems a curious case study in conflicting moods. The presidency of a self-appointed superhero was winding down: The Decider, George W. Bush, Waging War Against Evildoers Everywhere. Could it be that the Manichean self-image of America as fundamentally superheroic was so badly frayed that it could be questioned at the lowest intellectual price point, the summer blockbuster? Whatever: judging from later releases like *The Spirit* and 2009 attractions such as *Watchmen*, superhero fatigue hasn't exactly set in at the studios. In fact, the legal dogfight between Fox and Warner Bros. over the rights to the $100 million *Watchmen* suggests otherwise.

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ABSTRACT An analysis of 2008 Hollywood superhero blockbusters. *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* are humorous and often light-hearted; but the latest Batman film, *The Dark Knight,* which reinvents The Joker in Heath Ledger's performance, is much more grim and morally complex—a dark entertainment for pessimistic times.

KEYWORDS superhero films, *Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk,* Batman*, The Dark Knight*

DVD DATA *The Dark Knight.* Director: Christopher Nolan. © 2008 Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. Publisher: Warner Home Video, 2008. $28.98, 1 disc.

The Incredible Hulk. Director: Louis Leterrier. © 2008 MVL Film Finance LLC. Publisher: Universal Studios, 2008. $29.98, 1 disc.

Iron Man. Director: Jon Favreau. © 2008 MVL Film Finance LLC. Publisher: Paramount, 2008. $34.99, 1 disc.

IOWA AD

WHAT'S NEW IN *THE NEW WORLD*?

EDWARD BUSCOMBE ON AN EXTENDED DVD VERSION OF TERRENCE MALICK'S 2005 RETELLING OF THE POCAHONTAS STORY

The story of Pocahontas is an often-told tale. In the telling it has acquired mythological elements shared with other stories of encounters between Europeans and Indians, to such an extent that the original "facts" (if they are certain enough to be worthy of the name) have been distorted or obscured. In 1616 John Smith, one of the early English colonists in Virginia, recounted in a letter that ten years before he had been saved from certain death at the hand of the Powhatan Indians by a young teenage girl, named Pocahontas, who was the daughter of the chief of the Powhatans. Pocahontas grew to be on friendly terms with the colonists, but Smith made no suggestion that he was ever her lover. Smith was eventually obliged to return to England. Then, in 1613, Pocahontas was taken hostage by the English, and in 1614 she married John Rolfe, a tobacco planter. Two years later the couple journeyed to England, where Pocahontas was presented at court. They planned to return to Virginia, but Pocahontas fell ill and died at Gravesend in 1617.

By the nineteenth century, the legend was well enough known for Pocahontas to be deemed suitable material for the large-scale artistic depictions of historical subjects which the Victorians enjoyed so much; see for example John Gadsby Chapman's 1840 picture, *The Baptism of Pocahontas*, reproduced in Wikipedia's entry on her, and Victor Nehlig's painting of 1870, *Pocahontas and John Smith*, illustrating the iconic moment at which Smith is saved from death.[1] At this time plays about Indians had a vogue upon both the New York and London stages, and the story of Pocahontas was dramatized several times. James Nelson Barker's "operatic melo-drame" *The Indian Princess, or La Belle Sauvage*, with music by John Bray, was first performed in 1808. Written in iambic pentameters for the characters of quality, including the Indian nobility, with prose for the lowlifes, its title calls attention to two factors that had already become significant in the myth surrounding Pocahontas. In the first place, emphasis is given to her noble birth. It seems that whatever misgivings the Europeans may have had about a mixed-race relationship could be at least in part assuaged if the Indian woman made up for her racial inferiority with an elevated class status. Second, her beauty is important. Sexual desirability was another factor which could mitigate racial difference. These twin characteristics constitute virtually a *sine qua non* in stories of relationships between white men and Native American women, whether on the nineteenth-century stage or later, in the movies. (Stage and screen relations between white women and Indian men are much rarer and clearly cause a great deal more trouble; as they do, for example, in John Ford's *The Searchers* of 1956.)

What is also of significance in the story is the willingness of Pocahontas herself to cross the racial divide and by a gesture overcome the hostility between natives and settlers. The "good Indian" is a key concept here. Pocahontas goes against her father's wishes by risking her own life to save that of Smith; by definition a good Indian is one who helps the whites. Not only does Pocahontas wish to preserve John Smith from harm; in *The Indian Princess* she, along with her brother Nantaquas, welcomes the whites as bringers of wisdom, sent to rescue the Powhatan from the depths of their ignorance. Smith, says Nantaquas, is "the sun from which our darkened minds / Has chas'd the clouds of error."[2] So whereas the two white men, Smith and Rolfe, receive the benefit of Pocahontas's physical charms, legitimated by her supposed rank, Pocahontas and her people receive in return something altogether more estimable, the blessings of white civilization.

One further factor in the tale makes it function as a kind of ur-narrative of white–Indian relations. Though Smith himself makes no mention of a romantic relationship with Pocahontas, the legend eventually developed toward the elevation of such an affair over her subsequent marriage to Rolfe. But this relationship is doomed; Smith is eventually called

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Troubled love

The New World. © 2005 New Line Productions Inc.

away and Pocahontas is wrongly informed that he is dead (though according to one account they did eventually meet again, shortly before her death, as they do in Malick's film). By contrast, the union of Pocahontas with Rolfe, though in fact it produced a son, is regarded in the legend as more a marriage of convenience. And even that too is prematurely brought to an end with Pocahontas's early death. This pattern is subsequently repeated in a cycle of Western movies in which the hero falls for a beautiful Indian woman (almost invariably a chief's daughter), only for the relationship ultimately to be terminated by the woman's untimely death, as for example in *Broken Arrow* (1950) and *Across the Wide Missouri* (1950).

Further plays about Pocahontas followed, by George Washington Custis in 1830, and by Robert Dale Owen in 1837. A burlesque version, *Po-ca-hon-tas, or The Gentle Savage*, written by John Broughton in 1855, is testament to the enduring popularity of the myth (since you cannot parody a story no one has heard of). Pocahontas made an early entry into the cinema with a production by the Tannhouser Film Corporation in 1910. A comedy short followed in 1924, and a feature production in 1953 entitled *Captain John Smith and Pocahontas*, in which the eponymous couple are married, only for Pocahontas to later remarry when she believes Smith to be dead. Another feature production, *Pocahontas: The Legend* followed in 1995. I have seen none of these films.

Far better known is *Pocahontas*, the animated Disney version of the story, released in 1995. Pocahontas's body has the gently swelling bosom and exaggeratedly small waist of a Barbie doll, but her face is more Asiatic, with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes; she is perhaps Disney's first heroine to depart from the stereotypical Nordic type. John Smith, by contrast, has blond hair and finely chiselled features. Their romance is presented as an admirable attempt to explore and then dispense with racial antagonism (thus moving far away from the overt racism toward Indians displayed in Disney cartoons of the 1940s). The film offers a genuine meeting of cultures, but one which is wholly weighted on the side of the Indians, who are productively engaged, fishing and planting corn, as well as playing at lacrosse. Pocahontas introduces Smith to her animistic world view, in which not only animals and plants have personal identity, but rocks and water too. It's an idyllic, pre-lapsarian world, embodying a somewhat wishy-washy New Age spirituality and oneness with na-

ture: Pocahontas has two little companions, a humming bird and a racoon, and receives words of wisdom from a talking willow tree. Smith, for his part, attempts arrogantly to persuade her that the English have much to teach the Indians. He offers to show them "how to make the most of your land," and in an unguarded moment calls her people "savages." (In *The Indian Princess*, Pocahontas had been happy to describe herself as "the savage child of savage nature."[3]) Pocahontas indignantly rejects such a description and sings back: "But still I cannot see / That the savage one is me." She has a fair point, since the English are ruled by a tyrannical and greedy governor, whose only thought is of gold. Pocahontas, in a telling exchange, offers him her own kind of gold, a yellow ear of corn. At the end of the film the English and the Indians are preparing to attack one another, each chanting a war song which insults the other side as "savages." But Pocahontas's gesture in saving John Smith from her father's death sentence brings about a reconciliation between the two sides, even though Smith sails away back to England.

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Terrence Malick's treatment of the Pocahontas legend, though far more subtle and complex, turns out to have a surprising amount in common with the Disney version. The opening images of the film, accompanied by the swelling sound of Richard Wagner's overture to *Das Reingold*, show Pocahontas and other Indians swimming naked. The camera is under water, looking up, giving as it were a fish's view. Inescapably we associate the Indians with the natural world. And indeed this is the term that Captain Newport (Christopher Plummer), the leader of the colonists, first employs for them, referring to the Indians as "the naturals." Malick's practice of splicing into his narrative shots of birds, trees, insects, and animals which have no direct connection to the diegesis, but which instead act as an indirect commentary upon it, has been a characteristic of his work since the beginning of his career. In *The New World* this stylistic feature appears less of a quirk, more securely integrated into the larger thematic concerns of the film.

From the start it is clear that whereas the Indians are, in ways not wholly different from the Disney film, completely at ease among the woods and rivers of a pre-colonized Virginia (even if they do not actually talk to the trees), the Europeans are hopelessly out of place. The Indians wear costumes made of natural, organic materials adapted to the climate (deerskin, skimpy textiles), while the English clump around in their heavy armor and sweaty woollen garments. In the winter, while the English shiver, the Indians are warmly wrapped in furs. Whether the costumes of the Indians are authentic is uncertain; they bear only a passing resemblance to the Indians painted by John White in Virginia at the end of the sixteenth century (images recently exhibited at the British Museum in London). At one point Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) appears in a pair of fetching, indeed mildly fetishistic, deerskin stockings which would not be out of place on a contemporary catwalk. But at the same time as they are placed within the natural world, there is also a strangeness to the Indians' appearance. Their bodies are decorated with paint and tattoos which are less picturesque than grotesque (though there is a nice moment when John Smith, played by Colin Farrell, and an Indian compare tattoos, Smith's body exhibiting the usual sailor's designs).

The contrast between the English and the Indians is absolute in Malick's film. Whereas the Indians delight in each other's company, playing games together or grooming each other, the English argue among themselves or mooch around staring glumly into space. When they stir themselves it is to dig vainly for gold. Smith himself perceives the Indians as living in an ideal society: "They are gentle, loving and faithful, lacking in all guile and trickery. The words denoting lying, deceit, greed, envy, slander, and forgiveness have never been heard. They have no jealousy, no sense of possession." This is of course the view of the Indian as noble savage, a perspective which echoes the description of an Italian author soon after Columbus's voyages; the Indians, he wrote, "seem to live in that golden world of which old writers speak so much, wherein men lived simply and innocently, without enforcement of laws, without quarrelling, judges and libels, content only to satisfy nature."[4] This view was to be given a firm philosophical underpinning in the middle of the eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men*. By contrast, the English seem obsessed by questions of law and authority; our first view of Smith in the film is when he has a noose round his neck and is about to be hanged for mutiny. But although Smith remains true to his original opinion of the Indians, confirmed by the charm of the beautiful young Pocahontas, his compatriots soon take another view. Halfway through the movie the English are referring to the Indians as savages pure and simple, with no mention of nobility.

The romance between Pocahontas and Smith takes place in an oneiric swoon, its location the untilled, unspoiled natural world, as they roll in the grass together or stroll through the woods. A luminous and vibrant green is the dominant color, contrasting with the dirty greys and browns of the English habitation. The beauty of these sequences is irresistibly seductive. This is where Malick is at his best. The fluidity of the visuals, the graceful swooping and sliding of the camera, imparts a feeling of ease and freedom to the everyday life of

When worlds combine

The New World. © 2005 New Line Productions Inc. DVD: Entertainment in Video (U.K.).

the Indians. Clearly, careful thought has been given also to the movement of the actors in the frame. The Indians move quickly, lithely, the English are stolid and slow. Malick's use of music is also felicitous. The sensuous, languorous line of Wagner's melody is aptly suited to conveying the sense of trance-like reverie with which Smith's experience of Pocahontas is overlaid, while the slow movement of Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 23 adds its own wistfully delicate emotion to the idyllic scenes of Smith's life among the Indians. Our sense of these scenes as a kind of dream is reinforced by

Malick's practice of filming them not as a dialogue between the characters but as a voiceover by one of them (usually Smith but sometimes Pocahontas), an interior monologue largely detached from the on-screen action and which casts a nostalgic spell over what is seen and heard.

Eventually Pocahontas learns to speak English but her conversation with Smith has little intellectual substance. Their relationship exists in some sphere beyond society, removed from the tangible realities of the colonists' settlement. By contrast, Pocahontas's marriage to John Rolfe (excellently played by Christian Bale) is set among the paraphernalia of the English settlement, with its furniture, farm implements, clothing, and such. Gradually Pocahontas is "civilized," being baptised with a new name ("Rebecca"), taught to read and perform household chores. Yet she never appears integrated into this society in her inner mind. She continues to pray to the sun and appears to sleepwalk through her new life. Rolfe himself senses her detachment. Though drawn by her beauty, he justifies his marriage to her as being for the good of the colony, helping to cement its good relations with the Indians. He is aware that there is something in her that he cannot reach: "There is that in her I shall not know." That something is, we infer, in part her love for Smith. When she discovers that Smith is still alive, Rolfe accepts that the bond is still strong and promises that he will do "nothing against her will." But there is also a sense of an unbridgeable cultural gap. When Rolfe takes her to England she is accompanied by her uncle Opechancanough, played by the experienced Cherokee actor Wes Studi. Uncle and niece stare at the unaccustomed sights: a black man, horses, a stained-glass window. Opechancanough looks forward to seeing "this God" of whom the English speak so much. He has brought a stick with him on which he intends to make a notch for every Englishman he sees (a joke, oddly enough, anticipated in *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World*, Disney's sequel from 1998), but eventually he is forced to concede to Pocahontas that the English are as numerous as blades of grass.[5]

In placing the Indians within nature, the film certainly throws into sharp relief how threadbare are the claims of the English to represent civilization. Their attempts to transfer their culture into a new world very quickly run aground on the reefs of their own stupidity, greed, and general fecklessness, while petty power struggles lead to Smith's being overthrown as leader in the absence of Newport, and publicly whipped. But ultimately, Malick's view of the Indians as part of the natural world militates against any real possibility of understanding them as inhabiting a separate and different culture. The Indians merely represent an idealized escape from civilization, not an alternative form of it.

Even Pocahontas herself is a bit of a mystery; ultimately, perhaps, unknowable. Q'orianka Kilcher was only fourteen when cast. Her sexuality is elusive, fluid; she is more than a child yet still less than a woman. Her youth lends plausibility to her "child of nature" role, and she certainly has the looks to fit the bill as an exotically different, beautiful and aristocratic heroine. Mercifully, she is a long way from the Barbie-doll looks of the Disney conception. But she doesn't really have much to say to Smith, and even less to say to Rolfe, beyond making it clear that she is distancing herself both from his culture ("why do they want gold?" she asks) and from him personally, replying to his offer of marriage with the less than enthusiastic response, "If you like."

The use of language in the film is intimately connected to its construction of the nature/culture divide. As Smith and Pocahontas get to know each other in the Indian village, she tries to tell him a few words of her language, but he does not attempt to repeat them, insisting instead on giving her the equivalent English words. By the time Smith has gone back to the fort Pocahontas appears to be fluent in his language; when she comes in the winter bearing gifts of food she and Smith talk to each other in English. Smith's response to Pocahontas is to a force of nature; cultural transfer, by contrast, is wholly one way. Pocahontas is inducted into English and eventually into English ways. Smith does not, despite his frequently expressed yearning for a new life, go native. (*Pocahontas*, by contrast, simply sidesteps the language issue. Despite its sincere attempt to show cultural difference, when the heroine first meets Smith she speaks a few words of some Indian language, but when he speaks she immediately understands him and replies in fluent and only very slightly accented English.)

It's not that the Indians have no language. We frequently hear them speaking in their own tongue (which language is actually heard on-screen I have no idea). When Smith is captured by the Indians, he speaks English to them and they speak their language back. Incomprehension is mutual, and extends to the audience of the film, for no subtitles are offered. In the scene when Pocahontas saves Smith from death, however, subtitles are provided when the Indians speak, and later when Pocahontas converses with her father about whether Smith should be allowed to live. Clearly, important information is being provided, which the audience needs to understand. But when later Smith visits the tribe to which Pocahontas has been banished, once again there are no subtitles, even though an Indian makes a long speech. The effect at this point is to render the Indians even more unknowable, at times simply a part of the natural world, at other times a culture which is impenetrable. It's not that there is no sympathy for the Indian point of view. The strangeness and otherness of

England for the visiting Pocahontas and her uncle is represented with imagination, charm, and force. Nor would it be fair to expect Malick to have produced an ethnographic study of the Powhatan. Nevertheless, by the end of the film we have little or no sense of what Indian society is really like, only that it seems a great deal more admirable, because more "natural," than that of the English.

None of this need detract from the fact that Malick has made an exceptionally beautiful film. The ending is very moving, as Pocahontas plays with her son amid the alien formality of an English country-house garden, before the screen reverts back to the natural scenery of her homeland. The new DVD release has added twenty minutes to the 150-minute length of the theatrical release. (The image on the box, of Smith slashing wildly at a naked savage, does the movie no service at all, suggesting as it does some banal blood-and-thunder potboiler.) For the most part the added minutes are taken up with a few extra shots inserted into a number of scenes. The opening sequence of the Indians swimming is longer, John Smith's first journey up the river at the beginning of the film has more detail, and several of the scenes between Smith and Pocahontas are elongated in the later version. This does little to change the overall impact of the film, merely lending it a more relaxed, expansive feel. (Curiously, some sequences have actually been tightened in the extended version.) Malick has also added a series of chapter titles, the first one, "A New Start," coming with rather heavy-handed irony immediately before we see Smith with a rope around his neck, waiting to be hanged. One notable sequence has been added. At the end Pocahontas has a conversation in England with her uncle in which she says she has made a great many mistakes. "I hope that some day my people will forgive me." The scene adds further poignancy to her death, which follows shortly.

1. Reproduced in my book *"Injuns!" Native Americans in the Movies* (London: Reaktion, 2006).
2. See Montrose J. Moses (ed.), *Representative Plays by American Dramatists 1765–1819* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1918), p. 608.
3. Ibid., p. 611
4. Quoted in Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), p. 6.
5. *Pocahontas II* is considerably less "progressive" than its predecessor. When an Indian says that the whites have come to take their land, Pocahontas protests they should be given the benefit of the doubt. Once in England she manages to defeat the bad guys and secure the good will of King James. Far from dying in England, she and Rolfe return to Virginia, presumably to reinforce the English colonists occupying Indian lands.

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ABSTRACT An essay on an extended DVD of Terrence Malick's *The New World*, focusing on representation of relations between Native Americans and settlers from England, and the film's place in the history of the Pocahontas story.

KEYWORDS Terrence Malick, Pocahontas, Westerns, Native Americans, colonization

DVD DATA *The New World: The Extended Cut.* Director: Terrence Malick. © 2005 New Line Productions Inc. Publisher: New Line Home Video, 2008. $20.98, 1 disc.

KINO AD

THE POLITICS OF STYLE IN MIKLÓS JANCSÓ'S *THE RED AND THE WHITE* AND *THE LORD'S LANTERN IN BUDAPEST*

LASZLO STRAUSZ ANALYZES JANCSÓ'S SHIFT FROM AN AESTHETICS OF IMPERSONAL GEOMETRY TOWARD FACES IN CLOSE-UP

Fade in. The shot opens with the wide vista of a meadow cut in half by a creek. Slowly starting to move left in an impersonal tracking movement, the camera frames two soldiers firing their guns in the opposite direction. Later, the same men are encircled and executed, which the viewer does not see directly: the tracking frame leaves out the key elements of the action. In the beginning of the scene, the frame moves left, but this simple scheme is soon interrupted and the camera travels in both directions between the two parties without being motivated by character movement. It seems completely detached from the actions of the soldiers. Fade out. The opening scene from the 1967 film *The Red and the White* raises questions almost immediately. Who are these men? And why does the filmmaker seem so cold, uninterested in the fates of the characters?

The Hungarian director is Miklós Jancsó, whose career spans more than four decades. During the 1960s, he was noted as one of central figures to develop a symbolic "double language" typical of Eastern European cinema during the Communist era. Jancsó's films never directly address political themes. What he does instead, as I want to argue, is to display and criticize national ideologies in indirect ways, through stylistic choices. In the words of his 1960s collaborator Yvette Bíró, Jancsó developed "increasingly refined, sophisticated methods of speaking out."[1]

The double language was a way of circumventing state censorship by inventing cinematic tropes that alert local audiences could interpret as resistant. Though I emphasize questions of aesthetic design, it is important to stress that Jancsó's Communist-era work necessarily presupposed an audience accustomed to decoding cryptic forms of dissidence. Janina Falkowska, writing about Andrzej Wajda and Krysztof Kieślowski, has usefully described the process like this: "The act of negotiating the film's meaning becomes a continual process of accommodating and rejecting different ideological positions presented and not a process of instruction."[2] The tropes in Jancsó's work often deal with themes of oppression displaced into the historical past, thereby avoiding the cuts of the state censors. However, the allegorical style involves more novel visual strategies as well and it is such strategies, which allowed audiences to experience the film as a "site" of collective cultural resistance, that interest me here.

In his more recent work, made after the fall of the Communist regime, Jancsó's familiar aesthetic (rigid, complex, long-lasting shots with multiple camera movements) is transformed. In an entirely different national context, however—with censorship no longer a factor—social commentary and ideological critique continue to be embedded in the visual rhetoric. The detached geometry of the 1967 film gives way to a much more personalized, subjective style in *The Lord's Lantern in Budapest* (1998). In this film, the main characteristic is the handheld camera movement that creates an aesthetics of the face, which in its turn discloses Jancsó's interpretation of a new national ideology related to the ruthless "wild capitalist" economic experiments of the 1990s.

The work thus evolves, but there is also continuity. In particular, the aesthetic idea of *interchangeability* links the two films, though it gets inflected differently. In *The Red and the White* the impersonal, geometrical long takes critique the concept of collective identity, which according to Communist ideology is the subject of history. But in Jancsó's recent work situated in the post-Communist Hungary, depersonalizing geometry—the figure of collective identity—gives way to a more subjective, individual aesthetic. *The Red and the White* depicts armed conflict and its chief resource is the elongated tracking shot; *The Lord's Lantern* focuses on social inequality and its main visual element is the handheld close-up. But in both cases what is repeatedly and pessimistically depicted is the interchangeability of oppressors and oppressed in dehumanizing political systems.

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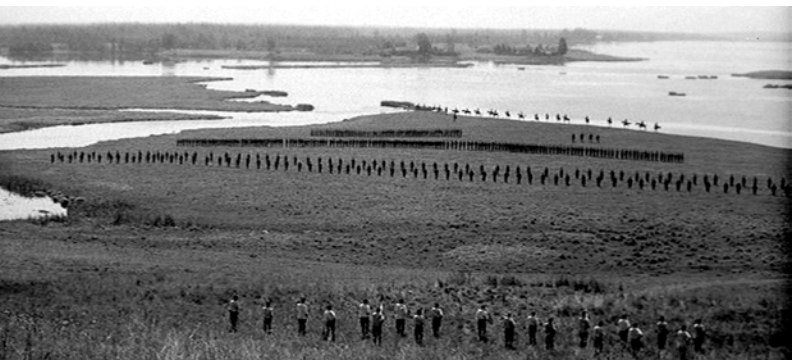

Top four: the geometry of the battlefield deletes all individuality. Bottom four: the aerial shot circles around the galloping horses and zooms in.

The Red and the White (Mafilm Studio 4, Mosfilm Studio 1, 1967). DVD: Kino.

IMPERSONAL LONG TAKES IN *THE RED AND THE WHITE*

Jancsó's early films often deal with historical topics, as in *The Red and the White*, set during the 1919 Civil War in Russia. After the 1918 Revolution, Soviet forces defended the new regime from foreign intervention and foreign-backed White (counter-revolutionary) forces. International volunteer regiments backed the Soviet army. The film depicts contending forces on one of the fronts where Hungarian volunteers had joined the defense. Most of the story takes place in and around an abandoned monastery used as a field hospital and garrison.

The tracking camera moves back and forth between the two armies. The argument has been made that the regimented movements of the soldiers create binary opposites.[3] However, the type, the speed, or the direction of the *camera's* movements are even more important than the characters'. Constructing impersonal contrasting compositions, Jancsó emphasizes geometry and, in doing so, does not allow any form of character identification to the viewer. This geometrical style seemingly refuses to take sides in the conflict.

To give an example of the style: near the end of the film, a few retreating Red soldiers, having escaped from the hospital, arrive at a hilltop from where they can overlook a large portion of the surrounding landscape. Suddenly they spot five Whites on horses riding toward them in a linear formation. The camera moves diagonally with the progressing Reds from right to left. As the five riders turn around on a circular path in front of the linear formation of Reds, a large number of White soldiers move into the frame from the right to the left, surrounding the Red contingent.

Here the choreography of the character movements actually contrasts the pattern of the camera movement. Jancsó has already used this strategy of contrast several times in the film to create a rhythm, but this time the shape made by the groups of soldiers adds a new compositional dimension. The geometrical group pattern erases individuality; the soldiers are part of formations and take part in an armed conflict that the director depicts as violent, non-rational, and senseless—in which individuality is meaningless.

As the diagonally moving camera frames the slopes of the hill occupied by the Reds, the huge White army in the background moves into the frame along the same path. Outnumbered by the enemy, the Reds retreat, and instantly the camera moves back with them toward the right. As soon as most of the Red soldiers have hidden in the rye, their commander walks back to observe the enemy; the traveling shot follows him. At this point about twenty White riders attack the hilltop. The Red officer retreats again, and the riders pass the Reds who are hiding in the field. The tracking shot now retreats diagonally as well. The Red soldiers come out of the rye and shoot at the Whites; the camera now follows the attacking Reds. This is the fifth time that the same traveling shot has changed direction. It becomes increasingly difficult to see who controls the situation. Jancsó confuses the viewer about the power relations throughout the entire film; the attackers are counter-attacked in the most unexpected moments.

Now the Reds run in the opposite direction, and the viewer for the first time sees that there are hundreds of Whites lined up facing them at the bottom of the hill. They retreat once more (simultaneously with the camera), regroup in a square-shaped formation, and march against the Whites, singing Communist songs. They march into certain death and the camera signals this by ceasing to follow them; it stops tracking on the left side of the hilltop and pans to the left, then it moves up on a crane. In the remaining part of the shot, we see the handful men of walking and finally running toward a line of White soldiers. They kill a few Whites before they are shot themselves. By this time they are at an extreme distance from the camera, depicted as toy soldiers on the battlefield. Although the camera zooms in a little, the Reds are still only specks in a line-shaped military formation.

A similar strategy can be discovered in another segment later on in the film, where the director visually connects two scenes by composing camera movement, character movements, and character arrangement that closely resemble each other. Here again the linear/circular dichotomy is used. The director uses camera movement in a *dialectical* way: he first introduces two groups of figures that are linked by means of similar camera movement, similar character movement, and similar figure arrangement. From the three analogous elements the viewer is invited to recognize Jancsó developing a metaphor for the brutality of the conflict: the men are mere animals, the soldiers on the ground are actually no more important in the war than horses. Jancsó also again withholds probably the most important factor of the scene that would be necessary to establish a cause-and-effect understanding of events. Who is firing at whom? Are the Reds shooting at the Whites, or vice versa?

The linear movement of the aerial shot and the circular movement of the group of soldiers and horses on the ground create the duality of the composition. After a long shot showing the aircraft Jancsó cuts to a large group of galloping horses riding in a closed formation linearly. The linear/circular dichotomy is reversed: now it is the quickly moving aerial camera that flies above the animals on a path that turns sharply to the right. In the first part of the scene, the movement of the camera (and the plane) was linear; this time the choreography switches back and forth. Flying above the

The aerial shot circles around the running men, equated with the horses, and zooms in.

The Red and the White (Mafilm Studio 4, Mosfilm Studio 1, 1967). DVD: Kino.

horses the camera starts on the right side of the animals and ends up on their left side. Once the camera is on the left, cinematographer Tamás Somló zooms in quickly on the animals, singling out two of three from the group. Cut back to the long shot of the plane, and the next shot shows the men running from the enemy above. The fleeing men are running linearly, just like the horses, and the plane circles over them, starting again from the right and turning toward the left. Several shots are fired and men, whose individuality is still undelineated, fall to the ground dead. As the shot continues, the camera once again zooms in quickly on the men, singling out two or three from the crowd. The similarity between the way the fleeing horses are filmed and the way the fleeing men are recorded is unmistakable.

Through style, Jancsó compares the soldiers to the horses, whose identity does not count. The asymmetrical power relations of the conflict erase any human aspects of the men participating, and their deaths are depicted as completely senseless. During the transition to the next scene the spectator finally finds out the identity of the soldiers on the ground. Once the camera gets down to ground level, we witness a group of Red soldiers fleeing from the White planes. By withholding information before this point, Jancsó refuses Manichean polarities and makes it impossible to identify or take sides.

In *The Red and the White*, the lack of private space (which prevents identification) originates in the rhythmical rigidity introduced by camera movements cutting across the setting. By creating figures through camera movement, the director sets up an impersonal sphere which functions as a commentary on the disappearance of subjective, personal space under the Communist regime. Personal identity was suppressed in this system—as the director shows. Ideologically, the Revolution aimed at overthrowing the bourgeois notion of subjective agency in order to replace it with an idea of the collective. Depicting his characters as toy soldiers on the map, or comparing them to animals, Jancsó creates the theme of the evasion of subjectivity. Additionally, by refusing to take sides, or even to distinguish between the rival armies, Jancsó subverts the idea of Communist orthodoxy and collectivity.

DISTURBING CLOSE-UPS IN *THE LORD'S LANTERN IN BUDAPEST*

Surprising audiences and critics, the then seventy-seven-year-old director started an entirely new cycle of films in 1998. Not only did he break with the historical topics of his early films, but teaming up with cinematographer Ferenc Grunwalsky and writer Gyula Hernády, Jancsó developed a modified narrative strategy and visual style as well. *The Lord's Lantern* and its six sequels relate the loosely connected adventures of Kapa (Zoltán Mucsi) and Pepe (Péter Scherer). In this first film of the cycle, the two men are gravediggers shot and killed multiple times, but resurrected every time to

find themselves reborn as various 1990s Budapest social types. This allows Jancsó to give an overview of post-Communist Hungary with its new oppressors and new oppressed, who are once more depicted as interchangeable.

With no censorship to worry about, Jancsó does not bother creating narratives that hide their politics in the manner of *The Red and the White*. But the visual style developed with Grunwalsky conveys a large amount of information that the non-communicative narration withholds. Style tells more about the characters' relation to other characters and their environment than any dialogue. Kapa and Pepe, whether they are powerful and wealthy businessmen or poor gravediggers, are really just oppressors and oppressed in different permutations—but it is the framings, compositions, and camera movements that indicate this.

In his early films Jancsó was interested in the visual dynamics of groups, which can be seen in the choreography of characters and camera movements. A relative lack of close-ups is noticeable in them and consistent with the erasure of individual psychology and character motivation. But in *The Lord's Lantern* close-ups of faces become crucial. The regular linear or circular tracking shots which characterized *The Red and the White* are replaced by a much more irregular, shaky style. Grunwalsky mostly uses a handheld camera that allows him to get disturbingly near to his characters. The way the characters' faces move across the frame in *The Lord's Lantern* defines the trajectory of the camera movement. The interactions between the figures in the scenes outline the blueprints for the shots' choreographies.

Toward the end of the first episode of *The Lord's Lantern*, the movements of the camera help Jancsó in creating a character's transformation. In the scene Józsi (József Szarvas) gets married. Where the wife came from and how are completely irrelevant questions for Jancsó. Her appearance allows for another series of events that provide the occasion for the characters to portray general types in oppositional relationships. As soon as Józsi, in this scene an idiotic nouveau riche who shoots his wife right after the wedding, is killed, he returns as a gravedigger. After the shooting Kapa and Pepe question Józsi about why he killed her. Józsi's blasé answer (he simply says that such questions do not interest him) sums up the way Jancsó refuses to explain character motivation.

The scene is a three-shot of them with Józsi still, even after his reincarnation, in his wedding suit. In the handheld shot Kapa and Pepe turn around Józsi, who stands in the middle of the frame. Several mirrors mounted on the camera reflect light on the two protagonists' faces, accentuating the differences between them, making them appear different from Józsi. In this sense, not only the camera is handheld, but also the light sources: the entire composition maintains its mobility and can follow the quickly moving and regrouping actors.

Here Jancsó uses a left/right–center binary to differentiate between different character attitudes. Kapa and Pepe, relegated to the opposite corners of the frame, care more about Józsi's wife than the brutal husband himself, who occupies the middle of the composition. Toward the end of the scene, Józsi eats a poisoned apple, and drops dead. His short "life" as violent husband is over. Even though he seemed to be in control via his central position, the director quickly kills him off. However, in the next scenes the viewer witnesses Józsi's "resurrection," this time as a powerless gravedigger himself. The centrifugal forces of Jancsó's narrative—referencing broader social forces—have repositioned him at the periphery. The director creates the theme of interchangeability of the oppressors and oppressed through the tale of one character. A humanist stance is revealed in the director's refusal to take sides in a morally unequivocal situation: the recurring cycles of oppression cannot be overcome by any sort of aggression.

Later the film combines the three binaries (foreground/background, left/right corners, and corners/center) in the mobile shots. Here Jancsó constantly plays with the different personalities of Kapa and Pepe. When Kapa appears as a powerful businessman, Pepe shows up as a policeman who wants to give Kapa a ticket for drinking and driving. Using the same composition—faces that remain in the opposite corners of the frame—the slightly adjusted handheld shot accentuates the transformation. Shifts in power create the dynamics of the scene: when the policemen want to fine Kapa, he offers them money to look away. As soon as he hands over the banknotes, the attitude of the two policemen becomes much friendlier. Kapa remains in control, an aspect that Jancsó emphasizes through the dual-layered shot: the corrupt policemen remain in the relative background, and Kapa is always closer to the camera. The differences are also underlined with the opposite ends of the frame versus the center area. The director here synthesizes three binaries in order to emphasize issues of domination and complicity. The use of the close-up emphasizes the obscenity of "wild capitalism," where the rawness of power relations is not disguised (and so distanced) by any official doctrine of collective welfare.

The device of camera movements being guided by mobile faces is carried to a new level at the end of the film when Kapa kills Pepe in a rising crane shot. In the scene Kapa is a security guard who has caught the gravedigger Pepe but does not recognize him. Before Kapa shoots his friend, who dies for the fifth time, Pepe's body starts to rise. As it does, Kapa takes a gun and walks away from the camera, which constantly maintains his position in the opposite corner of the frame.

Top four: the two gravediggers appear as different characters in an intimate handheld close-up. Bottom four: Pepe is killed during a crane shot.

The Lord's Lantern in Budapest (Kreatív Média M hely, 3J+1Bt, 1998). DVD: Navigator Film (Hungary).

Similar to contrasts created by corner/center, left/right, and foreground/background, the crane shot creates another level of difference. One of the characters is high above the ground, the other at ground level in the background, but the camera keeps them within the same composition. This last instance of the dualistic framing sums up the compositional strategy of the film. The characters in the opposite sides and corners of the frame represent oppositional attitudes or moralities, but at the same time they are replaceable and interchangeable. As such, their identity becomes transparent or invisible—just like in Jancsó's 1967 film. But while in *The Red and the White*, the issue that Jancsó's style raises is the erasure of individuality, in *The Lord's Lantern* the problem is the violent, wild, "dog-eat-dog" clash of survival strategies in post-Communist Hungary. Either violence and greed are naturalized, or it is a matter of passive mistrust and disbelief. These alternatives reflect a fundamental injustice and oppression. Oppressors and oppressed are depicted as interchangeable because, like the faces in Jancsó's close-up shots, they are equally caught in a dehumanizing system which is explored through shot composition and camera movement.

Throughout the forty years of Soviet-era rule in Hungary oppression was of a political nature, justified in official ideological terms through the concept of collectivism. During the capitalist experiments of the 1990s, the dominant ideology was organized around pure wealth that pretended to be, by contrast, apolitically individualistic. Jancsó in his contemporary films invites us to observe the faces of characters who are members of the new ruling classes. This presentation amounts to a twofold representation of dehumanization. On one hand, characters who respect someone else's individuality or humanity only do so because they do not possess the power to act otherwise. And, on the other hand, if the characters have the opportunity to act selfishly, they take it—disrespecting anyone's individuality and humanity without a second of hesitation. The interesting twist to this scheme is that most characters in *The Lord's Lantern* die and are reborn as characters from the opposite end of the social spectrum than before, oppressors rather than oppressed (or vice versa). Kapa and Pepe switch from gravediggers to murderous entrepreneurs.

Jancsó's political diagnosis is deeply pessimistic: he locates similar occurrences of ignorance, intolerance, and oppression as in the previous decades. Jancsó's method of undertaking a critique by means of visual rhetoric is still alive, but the figurative codes in his contemporary films are adapted to the contemporary political and ideological realities. The ideologies that attempt to naturalize the 1990s status quo have changed, and the director has found a stylistic way to analyze these. The most powerful aspect of Jancsó's recent style arises from the disturbing closeness of the characters' faces to the camera and the viewer. The new "top dogs" in Hungary quickly accumulated vast fortunes during the period of unbridled capitalism in the 1990s. Their power is not based on political position but on sheer wealth. Seemingly above the law and unaccountable for their oppressive, criminal actions, they live celebrity lives *in the face of the public*. This is why in *The Lord's Lantern* the viewer has to look at the characters, and so the ideologies they represent, from a minimal distance. Thus Jancsó relies on close-ups systematically and creates a new mobile visual style of handheld shots framing faces. The director's visual strategies display a critique of competing ideologies of the 1990s, where the capitalist entrepreneurs, who are often identical with politicians from the Communist past, start to form a new, pitiless ruling class. The film's close-ups make the spectator stare at these characters at disturbingly close range.

In *The Lord's Lantern*, Jancsó again does not take sides or make explicit statements. There are moreover no characters who provide any authoritative commentary. Instead the director constructs general types that stand for the mutually complicit ideologies which dominate contemporary Hungary. I suspect that Jancsó sees a dangerous interdependent relationship between individualistic ruthlessness, on the one hand, and disempowered passivity, on the other. He blurs individual characters in order to illuminate—and protest—this dualistic complicity.

When analyzed, the visual styles of these films disclose the terms of ideological critique. In *The Red and the White*, the moving camera creates a dialectic using different or opposite paths for the tracking shot and the character movement (linear or circular); in *The Lord's Lantern*, the moving handheld camera positions the characters on opposite sides or corners of the frame to display their duality and interchangeability. These complex visual figures of interchangeability exposes socialist egalitarianism (of the 1960s) and "wild capitalist" utilitarian individualism (of the 1990s) for what they are: unjust and dehumanizing ideologies.

1. Yvette Bíró, "Landscape after Battle: Films from 'The Other Europe,'" *Daedalus* 119 (1990), 162.
2. Janina Falkowska, "The 'Political' in the Films of Andrzej Wajda and Krzysztof Kieślowski," *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 2. (1995), 39.
3. Elemér Hankiss. "Motif and meaning in Jancsó's films," *Filmkultúra* 8 (1972): 72–76. See also Peter Milosevits, "The Changes in the Principle of Form in Jancsó's Films," *Filmkultúra* 16 (1980): 67–76.

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ABSTRACT By comparing the design of Jancsó's mobile shots in a 1967 and a 1998 film, this essay analyzes the director's political commentary via the two films' visual style. The author argues that the filmmaker's construction of cinematic spaces is anchored to the critical depiction of dominant national ideologies.

KEYWORDS Miklós Jancsó, camera movement, political allegory and film style, Hungarian cinema, post-Communism

YASMIN AHMAD'S "ORKED" TRILOGY

GERALD SIM DISCUSSES *SEPET* (2004), *GUBRA* (2006), AND *MUKHSIN* (2006), A SEQUENCE OF FILMS ABOUT AN ADOLESCENT MUSLIM GIRL FALLING IN LOVE IN MULTICULTURAL MALAYSIA

Beginning with *Sepet* and followed shortly by *Gubra* and *Mukhsin*, Yasmin Ahmad's trilogy has earned praise and recognition at festivals across Europe, Asia, and North America, winning awards at Berlin, Créteil, Kuala Lumpur, and Tokyo. Retrospectives of her work have been staged at the Tokyo, Thessaloniki, and Golden Horse International Film Festivals, and at the University of Hawaii. The sequence of films is named for its protagonist, a passionate but contemplative Muslim girl, played by Sharifah Amani, who negotiates relationships with the opposite sex. Respectively, the first two films show us Orked the teenager's true love and then marriage in her twenties. *Mukhsin* is a prequel that rediscovers her in adolescence, experiencing first love for the eponymous boy (Muhammad Syafie Naswip).

Sepet and *Gubra* take place in suburban Malaysia. The mood in the family's middle-class home is mellow. In their quiet bungalow Orked reads books and shares intimate moments with her family, away from economic and urban centers where the country is staging its advance into the developed world. *Mukhsin* highlights that removed environment by going back to an earlier time; the third installment nostalgically recalls the charms of village soccer games, small rustic wooden homes, cycling on unpaved roads.

The films are politically progressive, intellectually suggestive, but at the same time unabashedly sentimental. Every moment that suggests a thesis on modern life or global culture turns out to be the start of a downswing on the way to melodrama and the intensities of personal emotion. The analysis of such filmmaking is bound to be a reflection upon contradictions: no unambiguous intent or ideology dominates Ahmad's work.

Prior to the success of the trilogy, Ahmad had been known in Malaysian advertising circles as a director of television commercials for the leading firm Leo Burnett. For those unfamiliar with her features, that career detail might conjure up visions of a frantic, kinetic style. But Ahmad's aesthetic is antithetical. Her films' patient and static long shots are of the kind that would once have won praise from André Bazin. In *Positif*, *Mukhsin* is described as "elegant, mise-en-scène with precision, without paternalism or indulgence" (February 2008). An avowed cinephile student of Chaplin, Ozu, and Hou Hsiao-hsien, she prefers to allow human emotions and everyday gestures to unfold in their own time. Characters in *Sepet*, for example, frequently connect with each other while sitting down for meals. At home or in restaurants, Ahmad's camera captures the tables from a distance, rarely presenting conversations with close-ups or typical shot–reverse shots. These scenes are emblematic of her work's restrained quality: feelings slowly emerge from actors' bodies and the still spaces they occupy.

Her commercials, some of which have found popularity online, give an initial, though limited sense of Ahmad's concerns. On YouTube, the most watched ads by her were produced for Petronas, Malaysia's state-owned oil and gas company, a member of the Fortune Global 500. Especially popular is *Percintaan Tan Hong Ming* ("The Love of Tan Hong Ming"), a ninety-second special made to mark fifty years of Malaysian independence, which won gold at the 2008 Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival. A stationary camera records a little Chinese boy aged perhaps seven or eight, cutely gap- and buck-toothed, confessing his secret love for a pigtailed Malay girl, Umi Qazrina. Their faces, dress, and ethnically accented English mark the couple's racial and cultural differences from each other. At the end Umi agrees that Tan Hong Ming can be her boyfriend; his eyes light up and he beams a huge smile before leading her by the arm away from the camera.

The commercial shares with the trilogy a presentation of national identity and social harmony. The treatment of interracial romance in *Percintaan Tan Hong Ming* has a humanist poignancy that crosses over into sentimentality. Cultural dif-

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ference is transcended and we are left with an idyllic, politically correct vision of a multiracial Malaysia conducive to national pride as well as Petronas's corporate image. Perhaps we can read the commercial ironically, given the harsher social reality. However that may be, Ahmad certainly offers a sunnier account of things here than in the trilogy.

CONTROVERSY, SENTIMENT, MULTICULTURALISM

Sepet was initially banned. It was released locally only after suffering cuts at the hands of state censors, who noted its unflattering portrayal of Malay culture and its representation of Muslim characters who failed to perform their religion with sufficient piety. The main plotline is once again occupied by an interracial relationship. Orked, the worldly and spirited heroine, falls in love with Jason (Choo-Seong Ng), a stoic Chinese boy whom she meets while buying pirate DVDs at an outdoor market. According to Ahmad, one censor took specific issue with the film's indifferent attitude toward Islam, and asked why Orked did not attempt to convert her boyfriend. The skirmish left her despondent. "These people have defeated me," she wrote in her blog. "I'm down there. Floored. Sod it. I give up" (yasminthestoryteller.blogspot.com, December 8, 2004).

Every moment that suggests a thesis on modern life or global culture turns out to be the start of a downswing on the way to melodrama.

The director's artistic response to *Sepet*'s puritanical reception was swift. *Gubra* opens with the introduction of a "bilal" (Muslim religious leader, played by Nam Ron) and his wife (Nor Khiriah), a loving and sexually uninhibited couple who are soon revealed to be good friends with two prostitutes (Juliana Ibrahim and Rozie Rashid) living nearby. The religious pair's complicity and heretical acceptance of their neighbors' moral deviance provoked a predictable reactionary uproar from Malaysia's conservative wing; members of the local film establishment joined in the objections. Ahmad's reaction? A further riposte in *Mukhsin*. In an early scene, young Orked dances in the rain with her mother (Sharifah Aleya), prompting their uptight neighbors to sneer that they are forgetting to behave like Malays.

The controversy surrounding the trilogy reflects underlying political and social discord in Malaysia. Although the country inherited its parliamentary system from British colonial rule, its constitution is not secular and privileges ethnic Malay citizens. The document's guarantee of religious freedom is belied by Sharia courts whose jurisdiction over religious matters extends to marriage and child custody. In addition to tensions between secular and religious parts of Malaysian society, there is racial antagonism. Chinese Malaysians are often bitter at being marginalized; whereas ethnic Malays resent the disproportionate wealth of their Chinese compatriots.

The solution that the films posit for these conflicts is interracial romance, particularly of the irrational love-at-first-sight, written-in-the-stars variety. In contrast to their neorealist cinematography and unhurried pacing, the trilogy also relies on melodrama, sometimes excessively so. *Sepet*, for instance, departs from subtlety most inelegantly in the shot–reverse shot when Orked and Jason lock eyes at their first meeting, Ahmad draining the soundtrack of diegetic sound. Later, in the middle of their courtship, the lovers separate when Jason betrays Orked's trust (already weakened by a past sexual assault) by not being open about an ongoing but loveless relationship with a Chinese girlfriend that he cannot bring himself to end. She decides to leave for Britain on a scholarship, and in her parents' car en route to the airport, she reads Jason's final love letter. The climactic two-shot of Orked and her mother (played in this film by another actress, Ida Nerina) in the back seat is a weepy long take that culminates when Orked's father (Harith Iskander) explains his disapproval of Jason by saying that the boy is "not suitable . . . I'm sorry." In a revelation, Orked's mother then recalls that her own father had uttered those very words about her future spouse. The cathartic moment seems like an affirmation of fate, of true love finding its right course. Moved, Orked decides to return to Jason. Although I find this scene somewhat cloying, I must mention that when I showed the film to a class, this scene enthralled even the most cynical of my male students, even the ones weaned completely on Hollywood action movies. It is perhaps significant that although Ahmad uses melodrama, she never extends to camp.

The reason for that might be due to the fact that camp, according to Susan Sontag, requires preponderance of style, while Ahmad prefers everyday, anonymous settings and intimate stagings. Geographical markers are absent even in establishing shots. Orked and Jason's courtship takes place on a plain wooden pier, an unidentifiable bus stop and nondescript restaurants. *Gubra* opens with a close-up of the bilal's wife preparing a sandwich with "kaya," a local coconut-egg custard. As mentioned, *Gubra* and *Mukhsin* take nostalgic pride in setting. This is an observational aesthetic; its comedy and sentimentality do not trivialize or belittle the films' environment or their depiction of everyday life.

Clockwise from top left: a sandwich made with local coconut-egg custard (*Gubra*). A street performer; Jason sees Orked; Jason lovelorn on his mother's lap; Orked and her mother in an emotional long take; Orked sees Jason (all *Sepet*).

Sepet (2004). DVD: Golden Satellite (Malaysia). *Gubra* (2006). DVD: Golden Satellite (Malaysia).

What Ahmad does choose to display most constantly of Malaysia is its multiculturalism. For example, each introductory song or musical number in the opening minutes of *Sepet*, *Gubra*, and *Mukhsin* is in a different language: Cantonese, Hindi, and Malay respectively. In *Sepet*, Ahmad prefaces the (English) credits with Jason reading a Chinese novel to his mother (Mei-Ling Tan). We find out that the book had been translated from the original Indian. His mother cannot read it herself because she is Peranakan—a Malay-speaking ethnic Chinese steeped in the local culture. Jason reads in Mandarin, but converses in Cantonese with his mother, who in turn speaks to him in Malay. The cross-cultural melange is succinctly and nonchalantly conveyed.

Jason's family is often the site of the presentation of this topic. In both *Sepet* and *Gubra*, Ahmad stages arguments between members of the clan where each person is yelling in a different language. Because of the speed of the talking and the interplay of languages, precise subtitling is perhaps impossible, but this means we are all the more aware of the tangled, disputatious speech. If we are not familiar with the local languages and dialogue, we must acknowledge our distance from the cultural specifics being depicted. These scenes are interesting because they explore multiracial kinship through comedy, whose impact is primarily aural due to Ahmad's subdued visual style. The polyglot cacophony has an aesthetically pleasing, even beautiful, sonic affect. Departing from the usual trope of finding utopia through human commonality that she herself used in *Percintaan Tan Hong Ming*, Ahmad articulates that euphoria with conflict, constructing emotional complexity by finding warmth through aggression and humor.

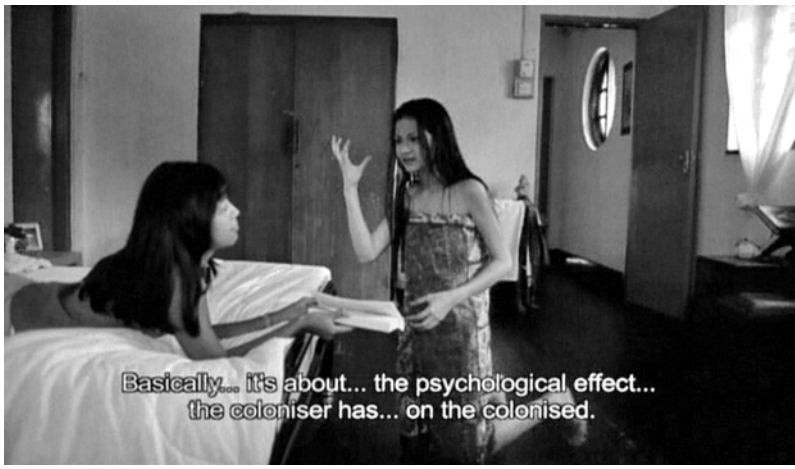
The trilogy is in tune with hot-topic themes of the moment, especially ideas about globalization and intertextuality. *Sepet*'s soundtrack includes several songs by Hong Kong cinema's Cantopop star Sam Hui, while *Gubra* opens with a recording by Bollywood playback legend Mukesh. Jason's mother loves the work of P. Ramlee, the region's cinematic icon of the 1950s and 60s. Orked's mother watches Hong Kong soap operas devotedly (with the help of subtitles). Ahmad's thorough knowledge of world cinema is evident in the films' allusiveness. Their dialogue can feel like a continual stream of transnational cinema's most voguish names. Amitabh Bachchan, Wong Kar-Wai, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Maggie Cheung, Bruce Lee, John Woo, and even Leonardo DiCaprio are all mentioned and thus evidently a part of the characters' cultural lives. Ultimately, it is not difficult to assume that a filmmaker so aware of how cinema travels would then recognize what her own would need if they wish to cross borders unencumbered.

EMOTION AND POLITICS

To understand Ahmad is to understand Orked. All so inevitably in today's wired world, the director maintains an open presence on her popular blog (see also yasminthefilmmaker.blogspot.com) where she interacts constantly with fans. She freely admits that the films are semi-autobiographical. Both auteur and protagonist have amorous parents frisky even in old age, who have raised modern, British-educated daughters in middle-class homes practising moderate Islam and speaking both Malay and English. It is a state of existence common in postcolonial Malaysia. Esoteric academics who feel that the mix of cultures, languages, and perspectives leads to an identity on the threshold of east and west call it liminality. The trilogy is lodged in just such an interstice. Ahmad sees the conservatives at home who marginalize her work as narrow-minded and regressive, clearly allegorizing them as Orked's snide neighbors in *Mukhsin*. But their disapproval brands it for Malaysia's worldly—and Anglophile—educated class. Abroad, the country's unique multiculturalism localizes the films, perpetually suspending them in a heroic outsider's limbo.

No one can doubt that the films pertain to postcolonialism. In a sequence on a par with the appearance of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations and Simulacra* in *The Matrix* (1999), the narrative of *Sepet* pauses for Orked to summarize a copy of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that her best friend has plucked from her collection. As they stroll through her house, Orked relates her interracial dating preferences to Fanon's writing, specifically his discussion of colonialism's impact on the colonized subject's libidinal psyche, which internalizes Eurocentrism and comes to fetishize the colonizer.

Fanon's approach to postcolonial theory is unusual in its concern with politics and psychology (which Ahmad studied at university in addition to philosophy). The director channels Fanon in her emphasis of the personal over the political. In fact, it would seem that she takes it even further when she touts emotionalism as an artist's priority. So what do we suppose when Orked undermines her own literacy in postcolonial theory by insisting that her preference for Chinese boys—the word "sepet" refers to Chinese- or slit-eyes in Malay—is uninterpellated, outside ideology? She never satisfactorily explains her own preference beyond the simplistic tautology of we-love-whom-we-love. Ahmad repeats that recourse to emotions continually. We learn that Orked's housekeeper Yam (Adibah Noor) listens to Siamese songs, untroubled by the foreign lyrics, deriving pleasure solely from the music's emotive qualities.



Clockwise from top left: the bilal's wife babysits for a prostitute (*Gubra*). Intercultural bridges between Malay and Chinese forged in hospital (*Gubra*). Orked explains Frantz Fanon's writing (*Sepet*). The trilogy ends by breaking the fourth wall (*Mukhsin*). Orked's obsession with Takeshi Kaneshiro (*Sepet*). Performance of "Hujan Keroncong" (*Mukhsin*).

Sepet (2004). DVD: Golden Satellite (Malaysia). *Gubra* (2006). DVD: Golden Satellite (Malaysia). *Mukhsin* (2006). DVD: Dragon Jester Entertainment (Malaysia).

Ahmad appears to consider analysis one of the more serious errors that her audiences can commit. She claims to make films that are meant to be felt, and prefers to see her work as humanist in a very elemental way, meditating as it does on the instinctual and emotional aspects of human behavior. "We all just want to tell a story. Or to put across a feeling we have about humanity, as we observe it," as she puts it on the blog (August 22, 2006). Furthermore, she rejects approaches that might over-intellectualize her work, partly in response to some condescending encounters with pretentiousness early in her career. As her blog recounts, one academic in particular whom she took to be of the those-who-can't-do-teach variety, criticized the absence of conventional narrative structure in her first film. The same entry describes her bemusement at the redundancy to filmmaking practice of the term "mise-en-scène," which a young crew member on set once used. (Do we dare to imagine what she thinks of "diegesis" . . . or "liminal"?) But this filmmaker is no fool. She can dismiss academic ruminations on subtext as obstacles to creative instincts and as . . . well, merely academic, but manage just four paragraphs later to articulate a definition of "subtext" that would satisfy any academic standard. And it would certainly be a mistake to consider her trilogy anti-intellectual.

Consider the scene where Orked's parents share pillow talk about their daughter's romance. Her father declares that he "will never understand you women, even if I live to be a hundred." When his wife replies with a semi-philosophical axiom, that "your job is to love us, not understand us," he responds colloquially that she is showing off. What he comically and doltishly resents is how she wields her educated intelligence through the remark. Her admonition to feel and not to think is itself an intellectual gambit. Thus we would be wise not to take Ahmad's exhortations on filmmaking—"I just follow my feelings, one scene at a time!" (December 11, 2007)—too seriously. What the reflexive insertion of Fanon should already convince us of is that she thinks as much as she feels.

Ultimately, how would that feelings-only approach to art fare against the political issues foregrounded in these films? The interracial romance is a popular subgenre of postcolonial cinema. Examples like Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and Gregor Nicholas's *Broken English* (1996) demonstrate how it provides a convenient narrative structure on which to balance history, tradition, modernity, identity, culture, ethnicity, and gender. *Sepet* contributes to the genre by, on the one hand, not resorting to the trope of racist parents: Sepet's parents are leery of Jason's trustworthiness, not his race. On the other hand, Ahmad does not see the modern world—or least contemporary Malaysia—as having moved into a post-racial era. The silent anger of Jason's Chinese girlfriend in discovering a photograph of the Malay Orked in his wallet makes that plain. The weight of the scene comes from a compound of his betrayal and her prejudice. In the end, the main means of reconciliation that the films literally and narrowly suggest come from romance and compassion. But the question remains whether that alone is enough to bring about transformative progress. Ethically, should it ever even try to?

The political realists in us would refuse such naiveté. We might also quibble with Orked's dismissive argument that racial fetishism is acceptable while prejudice is not. One cannot, in my opinion, play with potent ideas of race and gender purely on "emotional" terms without letting ideology into the discussion. It is simply too easy to emphasize human relationships and individual psychology at the expense of political and social context; too easy, too mainstream and, indeed, too ideological.

The most complex and layered films tackle both and encourage audiences to do the same. By that token, aren't the best film critics —Bazin among them—also able to enjoy the object itself? Contrary to Ahmad's admonitions regarding our job to love it, not understand it, she does indeed ask us to elicit those opposite pleasures. Could it be that we have to recover our very capacity to feel before we can act on what is around us?

Mukhsin concludes the trilogy with a musical number where Ahmad's real-life parents perform a Malay song on a piano. The camera tracks back as she herself leads members of the cast and crew to gradually introduce themselves into the final celebratory long shot. Is this a Brechtian calculation or a personal offering of community through cinema? The fourth wall dislodged, would she have us conduct an analysis or gratefully participate in her open-hearted gesture? The real issue might be whether we *can* and *should* try to decide.

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ABSTRACT *Sepet* (2004), the sequel *Gubra* (2006), and prequel *Mukhsin* (2006), directed by Yasmin Ahmad, narrate the three major relationships of Orked, a Muslim girl in Malaysia negotiating them at different points in her life. The essay considers Ahmad's cinephilia and sentimental style, and their relation to the trilogy's postcolonial themes.

KEYWORDS *Sepet, Gubra, Mukhsin,* Yasmin Ahmad, postcolonial

DVD DATA The trilogy is unpublished in the U.S. The following editions were consulted: *Sepet* (Golden Satellite, 2005), *Gubra* (Golden Satellite, 2007), *Mukhsin* (Dragon Jester Entertainment, 2007).

FROM UNDERGROUND TO MULTIPLEX: AN INTERVIEW WITH TODD HAYNES

SCOTT MACDONALD TALKS TO THE PORTLAND-BASED DIRECTOR ABOUT BRINGING AN AVANT-GARDE SENSIBILITY TO COMMERCIAL CINEMA

Todd Haynes's roots are avant-garde and independent. *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), which is no longer available because of legal action (as Haynes explains in the interview), uses Barbie dolls as characters in a highly experimental biopic, while his debut feature, *Poison* (1991), was inspired by Jean Genet.

More recently, Haynes has had a successful commercial career. His excellent update of Douglas Sirk weepies, *Far from Heaven* (2002), is especially notable. It earned Julianne Moore an Academy Award nomination for best actress and Haynes a nomination for best screenplay, and won Golden Globes for Haynes (screenplay), Moore (actress), Dennis Quaid (supporting actor), and Elmer Bernstein (original score).

Haynes is not, however, moving linearly from underground to mainstream. Another unconventional biopic, *I'm Not There* (2007), has much in common with avant-garde films, fracturing narrative and using other disorienting devices in its kaleidoscopic presentation of Bob Dylan's life and music. *I'm Not There* brings an avant-garde sensibility to bear on a commercial project as successfully as any recent film I know.

To what extent does Haynes regard his work as part of the avant-garde tradition? On October 15, 2008, I hosted an on-stage conversation at Oregon's Portland Art Museum, where I raised this question. In order to provide reference points for our discussion, I showed excerpts from *Superstar*, *Poison*, *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993), and *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). After I had transcribed and edited the interview, I went back to Haynes for his further comments and, for the purposes of publication, asked follow-up questions about *I'm Not There*.

My thanks to Autumn Campbell and Jeremy Rossen, directors of the Portland microcinema, Cinema Project; they organized the event, which was the kick-off for "Expanded Frames," a five-day celebration of Cinema Project's fifth anniversary. The Haynes event was co-sponsored by the Northwest Film Center.

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Scott MacDonald: I've been interested in talking with you about your awareness of avant-garde cinema for several years. My interest was piqued once again when I saw *I'm Not There* in a packed downtown Boston theater last fall. Early in the film a few people left—something that happens at most any screening of avant-garde films attended by more than avant-garde aficionados—but after that, as far as I could see, nobody left. And at the end, when the credits were rolling, I looked around and everybody was still sitting there, talking. I thought, "Wow! Todd Haynes has made an avant-garde feature film that has kept nearly this entire audience in their seats."

You earned a B.A. from Brown and then studied at Bard College, which has long been identified with avant-garde filmmaking . . .

Todd Haynes: I never got a degree from Bard; I was there only briefly, during the first summer of their three-year MFA program offered at the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts, a cool MFA program that you can do in summers. I had the concept and the script for *Superstar* with me when I arrived at Bard.

My sense of being a filmmaker was modeled on the people I had met at Brown, where I had been an undergraduate, people like Leslie Thornton, an experimental filmmaker I greatly admired, who joined the staff during my last two years there. At the time, she was just beginning her amazing collection of "Peggy and Fred" films. Leslie, along with my film theory mentors Michael Silverman and Mary Ann Doane, advised and participated in my thesis film, *Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud* [1985].

I looked at the work of the filmmakers at Brown and at the work of filmmakers I studied there, and felt sure that my sensibility and my interests were never going to put me into mainstream filmmaking. I figured I should get a degree and teach. That's what they had done, and they seemed able to balance their own filmmaking with their academic lives. So with that plan in mind, I went to Bard, where it was just me

When dolls cry

Superstar. Courtesy Todd Haynes/Killer Films.

and one other filmmaker (Marcelle Pecot); at that point, the Bard program was mostly painters and sculptors.

I spent that summer in the sweaty, mosquito-ridden heat of Annandale-on-Hudson making the sets and props for *Superstar*. At the very end of the summer I got my friends together and we shot the film there. Then I moved to New York and cut *Superstar* in my Brooklyn apartment that fall.

I was soon involved in a new venture, with my friend Barry Elsworth, who I went to college with, and Christine Vachon, who has been the producer of all my feature films. Barry had received an endowment and wanted to form a nonprofit organization that helped emerging filmmakers, and together the three of us started Apparatus Productions in 1987–88. Apparatus was a reaction to what seemed to us to be happening around independent/experimental film at this time.

I had been exposed to classic experimental film, best exemplified by Stan Brakhage—that is, a basically non-narrative, abstract, and personal cinema—in high school and in college. A very influential high-school teacher and poet named Christina Adams first exposed me to films by Brakhage, Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, James Benning, and others.

But during my college years, during the early 1980s, there started to be something of a shift in the kinds of subject matter and the approaches that were acceptable and considered interesting to experimental filmmakers. I remember Sally Potter's *Thriller* [1979] as a turning point (Sally went on to make *Orlando* [1992]); and I remember *Riddles of the Sphinx* [1977] by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen—feature-length, but experimental in every other way. We studied *Riddles*, and both Peter and Laura came to Brown at various times to discuss their work.

These films were beginning to work with commercial genres and to make direct references to popular culture using the experimental vernacular. Of course, to describe this moment as a shift is to overlook whole traditions of experimental film that preceded Potter and Mulvey–Wollen, including Warhol and the Kuchar brothers—and others who, earlier on, were also interested in referencing Hollywood and genre filmmaking. But in the late 1970s and early 80s this was happening in a specific way that interested me, and Christine and Barry, tremendously.

We three began to think of ourselves as experimental narrative filmmakers, and what was of particular interest to us, as Apparatus Productions, was a difference in the way in which experimental film was produced before and after the shift I've described. If you were in the tradition of Brakhage, you were making your films alone, experimenting on an individual level with the nature of image and cinematic time. You didn't need any help; you could make your films by yourself. But as soon as you were employing references to genre and commercial style in your work, you needed people to help you, and we figured that that's where our organization could come in.

We thought that people just coming out of college and moving to New York City had no chance of getting grants from the New York State Council on the Arts or the National Endowment for the Arts, and that Apparatus would provide production support and financing to emerging experimental narrative filmmakers during that delicate transition period. Christine had to teach Barry and me the hierarchy of film production practice, and we learned and experimented with this new way of working in the films that we were helping to get made. Apparatus was never going to be about our own work. We did have three years of some success in getting interesting work produced [Apparatus helped produce seven films: *Cause and Effect* (Susan Delson, 1988), *Muddy Hands* (Even Dunsky, 1988), *American Lunch* (Julian Dillon, 1988), *He Was Once* (Mary Hestand, 1989), *La Davina* (M. Brooke Dammkoehler, 1989), *Oreos with Attitude* (Larry Carty, 1990), and *Anemone Me* (Suzan-Lori Parks and Bruce Hainley, 1990)].

As *Superstar* started to take off and gain attention, our experience with Apparatus, with the hands-on, New York-based practice of working with small crews and local craftsmen and creative people, led to our collaborating on my first feature film, *Poison*.

I think you're correct that there was a kind of pivot at the end of the 1970s and during the early 80s, from filmmakers whose films looked more or less the same from beginning to end, or expressed a certain very particular kind of structure from beginning to end, to films that started to mix things up. *Superstar* was made almost simultaneously with Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't* [1987] and a year or so before Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* [1989], and each of these films combined approaches common to both documentary and fiction, plus performance, poetic experiment, found footage . . . into a single work.

Yes, there was less focusing on formal questions and the material status of the image, and more commentary about cultural and political issues and on the debates that were occurring around us.

There was also a striving for a larger audience; by the late 1970s it was clear that certain forms of avant-garde film were probably not going to have anything like a substantial audience, at least not any time soon.

I guess that was true. But though *Superstar* certainly generated a bigger audience than most experimental films, a larger audience wasn't something that I set out for, at least as I recall.

In my mind, *Superstar* was an experimental film, but unlike early films by Su Friedrich and Abigail Child and Marlon Riggs, and others—and maybe this is *not* true for all those filmmakers; I'm not sure—it wasn't immediately accepted into the venues for experimental film.

I understand that the Collective for Living Cinema wouldn't show *Superstar*.

The collective refused to show it. The Whitney and MoMA people didn't want to show it. Millennium refused to show it. We had to rent Millennium's theater ourselves for something like seventy bucks a night (which at that point felt like a lot), to show *Superstar* and *Assassins*. Karen Cooper at Film Forum loved *Superstar* and *wanted* to show it, but was worried about the legal issues.

With *Superstar* we had three years of freedom before the lawsuits came. And I knew they were coming; I knew our days were numbered. *Superstar* did have a robust life, mostly due to the good fortune of getting a *Village Voice* review: [J.] Hoberman singled it out in a lead review, which helped art museums and galleries and art centers and colleges around the country start booking it.

Superstar did show at the New Museum in a theme series on video (during that first year it was almost always shown as a video film in museums and galleries) and at clubs. It was part of "Karen Carpenter Night" at the Pyramid Club, following fantastic drag performances of Karen Carpenter songs. Pyramid was *packed* with people just standing around talking, and I was afraid that they wouldn't stop talking to watch the film, but once the film started, everybody was frozen watching it and drinking their beer—amazing. That was one of my all-time-favorite screenings.

So, as experimental film has always done, *Superstar* occupied a hybrid position between the more traditional experimental film venues, which had rejected it, and other, broader arts and semi-theatrical venues. Then eventually it became a kind of coveted bootleg object that circulated illicitly. As a result of this circulation of the prints and video copies, the *texture* of the film changed, and *Superstar* bore the marks of that illicit circulation. One writer said that the disappearing image on the surface of the bootleg *Superstar* tapes was like the disappearing Karen Carpenter body in the movie [Lucas Hilderbrand, "Grainy Days and Mondays: *Superstar* and Bootleg Aesthetics," *Camera Obscura* 57 (2004)].

Of course, the most unusual aspect of *Superstar* is the use of the Barbie dolls to do the leading roles. When I try to think of a cinematic a predecessor to this approach, the only film I can think of is *A Town Called Tempest* [1963], an 8mm film by George and Mike Kuchar. It's about a tornado coming through a Midwestern town, and as I remember (the film is no longer in circulation), some of the characters are little plastic people. What was fascinating about that film was that even though George and Mike were using obviously primitive means, the brothers knew enough about genre film to effectively mimic Hollywood visual grammar. On some crazy level, the sequence works.

Did you know their work before you began making films?

I can't remember when I first saw Kuchar brothers' films. It's very likely that I did see some before making *Superstar*,

but I was much more conscious of Laurie Simmons. She's a visual artist who was using dolls at the time. I'm sure there are others who preceded her, but she became known for that work and for her beautiful photographs of dolls. I don't know if she ever made films.

I've never felt that anything I've done was particularly original. My work is about appropriating and responding to cultural influences and stimuli and ideas, and recombining those elements in ways that make you think about them or see them differently.

The whole *Superstar* project started innocently and goofily, when, one day, Cynthia Schneider, my best pal from Brown, said, "Let's make a movie together!" *She* said, "Let's have it be with pets!" and *I* said, "No, let's have it be with dolls!" I had studied narrative theory in college and was very interested in doing a genre piece where I would carefully follow all the rules of narrative structure, but use dolls instead of live actors. Would an audience feel the same emotional connections with the story if it was performed with dolls, as they feel when it's Meryl Streep up there? I wanted to see if the form has as much to do with how we connect with a film, as the content does.

But at first, we didn't have a content. We just knew that we weren't going to work with real people. One day I was sitting at Café Dante in the West Village, where they were playing 1970s retro music, and I heard Karen Carpenter singing "every sha-na-na-na, every woewoewoe." Karen had died just three or four years earlier, and hearing that music and that voice, after the death and after the new insight into this popular figure the nature of her death had given us, was suddenly very powerful.

She had become a figure of ridicule, even cruel ridicule, in some circles (I'll never forget that Grammy Awards where Bette Midler introduced Karen Carpenter and *had* to say some nasty thing about her). Earlier you'd make fun of that deep, lilting voice and think, "Ah, she's just a crock; what does *she* know about pain and suffering!" But now, when I listened to it again, the song had other levels. I called Cynthia, and I was like, "We gotta do the Karen Carpenter Story!" and she was like, "Okay, okay, we'll use dolls!"

Were you sued first by the music people or by the Barbie people?

The Barbie people were the first to emerge. They sniffed around at what we were doing, even to the degree that I received in the mail copies of their patents on the Barbie doll body. The patents were all for separate body parts! There was a page for just the torso; turn the page, an arm; turn the page, another arm—demonstrating, as if there were any question, their legal jurisdiction over Barbie's body, which, of course, echoes what the film is about!

We talked to a lawyer about how to defuse the issue, because Mattel had a long history of going after products that were mimicking their originals. Many of the dolls that we used in *Superstar* came from thrift stores and weren't Mattel products, but knock-offs, so there was already a blur to the actual Mattel product that was being used. Mattel backed off quickly; I think they saw that the music rights were a more severe legal obstruction heading my way fast, one that would also take care of their problem just fine. And it did.

The use of montages, of course, is common to commercial film as well as avant-garde film, but the montages in *Superstar* remind me of avant-garde work, including certain Brakhage films and some of Bruce Conner's work, especially *Report* [various versions, 1963–67], his film about the assassination of JFK.

I've seen some of Bruce Conner's films, but I'm not certain I was thinking about his work in particular at that time, though you're right, the montage work in that film comes out of experimental traditions. It *also* comes out of narrative and genre traditions, although I think I was taking it to some extremes: I use references that explode out of, or can't be contained within, a narrative explanation of Karen Carpenter's bad emotional state.

That's what reminds me of *Report*: at the end of that film Conner moves away from the death of Kennedy into a kind of free-form montage of the commercial context within which all political events play out in this country.

How fully were you trying to be funny in *Superstar*? Aside from the Barbie dolls, it comes across as a relatively conventional documentary about a serious subject.

At the time, there was always a question about the film's attitude toward Karen Carpenter. Was I being a little too ironic or campy or something like that. Of course, as soon as you deal with dolls as a vehicle for telling a story or with a character as overdetermined as Karen Carpenter—particularly if you're a gay filmmaker, identified with traditions of camp sensibility and humor—you're going to create those questions. And they were fair questions I thought. But in fact, Cynthia and I had an almost childishly earnest desire to understand this character *against* the grain of the criticism and the dismissal of her as a serious subject or singer. We thought of ourselves as trying to rescue Karen Carpenter from her family.

Superstar was also our way of trying to understand anorexic behavior, which, as we learned, often occurs within very controlling families, and in Karen Carpenter's case, was compounded by the extraordinary pressures on a young girl who was suddenly in the spotlight and whose every change in body fat was being discussed worldwide. Her desire to take back control over her life was something that we understood and tried to create some sympathy for.

In the *Superstar* montages there are images of spanking. Spanking is a major motif in your work for awhile, and I'm wondering what spanking means to you. The way it's positioned in the films leads me to think that, among other things, you see spanking as a re-direction of repressed sexual energy, maybe repressed male, gay sexual energy. Am I stretching here or . . .

It has different meanings in the different films, though I don't think spanking has recurred all that often. It occurs in *Superstar*, and, of course, in *Dottie Gets Spanked* [1993] . . .

And in *Poison* and also in Mary Hestand's *He Was Once,* an Apparatus film that you performed in . . .

I guess it does recur quite a bit! There's a fantastic article by Freud called "A Child Is Being Beaten." It looks at mostly female subjects who told him about their fantasies or memories of witnessing little boys being spanked in the schoolyard, and how this event would create tremendous pleasure, sexual and otherwise, for them.

You've included that idea in *Dottie Gets Spanked*; the sister clearly enjoys seeing a boy getting spanked.

Absolutely. What I found so interesting, and useful in terms of anorexic behavior, is the tremendous pleasure some female subjects have in orchestrating a sadomasochistic spectacle for themselves, where they are basically controlling all aspects of the situation. Freud sees it as a clitoral stage where girls are empowered, and feel a freedom of expression and agency that they don't feel later when they're vaginally oriented.

I remember reading accounts that made clear that to an anorexic, control over the body brings great pleasure and is, in fact, part of the addiction. Anorexics would say, "I hear a voice telling me, don't eat, don't eat, and another voice, telling me, okay, okay, I won't." This suggests the double role of being victim and punisher at the same time: a miniature sadomasochistic drama is going on in the anorexic subject's head.

In *Superstar* the only time you see human hands is when hands make one doll spank another. There I was referring to the way kids play with dolls and play out their fantasies, sexual and otherwise. The spanking in *Dottie* is more personal, more weirdly rooted in my early childhood memories and in a dream that I had as a child, which is actually replicated in the film.

At one point I was back at my parents' house. They'd put aside a box of my childhood drawings for me, and as I was sorting through the images, I was reminded of how obsessed I was as a kid with Lucy, and Elizabeth Montgomery, and the Flying Nun and Alice in Wonderland and Cinderella—all that girl stuff. It started with *Mary Poppins* [1964], the first film I remember seeing. I would draw these women endlessly, and I especially remember loving to draw the eyeliner and the big nails and the lipstick; in my drawings the women all look like whores!

I grew up in Los Angeles, and I think my parents met Lucille Ball on a vacation somewhere, so I was able to go to her show as a kid. I visited during the run of *Here's Lucy* [1968–74]. As in *Dottie Gets Spanked*, I made her a book and handed it to her when we visited the set. We all know that the television "Lucy" she portrayed was a sort of child woman, so it was phenomenal to watch the real-life Lucille Ball controlling the entire production like a general. There was a sort of mock director standing to the side, but Lucille was clearly in charge of everything, and then suddenly she'd be back in character, crying "Waaaaaaa!"—the child woman again. That duality was fascinating to me, partly because it mirrored a different duality in my life and my fantasy world.

At a certain point, PBS, through ITVS, was trying to get independent filmmakers and experimental filmmakers involved in television; they wanted to produce short films dealing with issues of family. I decided to work with my childhood fascination with Lucy and to focus on the spanking issue—even though my parents didn't believe in spanking.

That's talked about in the film.

Right, because the boy *doesn't* get spanked, and he notices that other kids *do*, and so it creates curiosity and desire around spanking.

Another part of this project came from that dream I had as a child. I must have been three or four—very young; the dream ended with a spanking that I received from the strongest man in my world: my Uncle Barry. At the time, my grandmother was studying art, and she had all these instructional books around that featured the musculature of human body. In the dream, at the point of the spanking, I experienced a flood of images; I saw a rapid-fire montage of these drawings and experienced a kind of orgasm.

This orgasmic moment expressed itself as a montage?

A cinematic montage. Right out of Bruce Conner!

I find spanking a fantastic theatrical ritual in the family setting. There's something interesting about *desiring* spanking, *desiring* subjugation: it unseats the power dynamic, because you're not supposed to want to be spanked. To desire spanking is to undermine the father's control.

What's so interesting about *He Was Once*, Mary Hestand's evocation of the *Davey and Goliath Show*, is that it's almost *Superstar* in reverse. Mary wanted to have actors playing dolls, and so we shot the whole thing moving in half-speed motion, and under-cranked the camera so that our movements seemed to be in normal speed. We did a slow-motion

Subversive pleasures

Dottie Gets Spanked © 1993 Caboose Productions. DVD: Alamode Film (Germany).

pantomime to the prerecorded dialogue. I love that *He Was Once* ends with the *father* being spanked, being completely undermined in the power dynamic.

At one point in the dream sequence from *Dottie Gets Spanked*, the father is standing behind the mother who is standing behind the boy who is sitting in front of the TV set watching Dottie. This brings back something in my own life. When I was the boy's age, my favorite television personality was Liberace, which made my parents nervous. I didn't get spanked for it and they didn't tell me to turn the show off, but when I was enjoying Liberace, I could always feel them behind me, worrying about what this might mean, or worrying whether they *should* be worried, and I always felt defiant of their concern.

It's amazing how kids understand shame before they even understand the word! They *feel* it, and that's a lot of what *Dottie* is about. In the scene that directly follows the sequence you just mentioned, the boy carefully folds up his drawing of Dottie getting spanked, wraps it in tinfoil, and buries it in his backyard, and the film ends. It's as if he's preserving something for the future.

You were born in 1961. I'm surprised at how well you seem to know the 1950s, and what it was like for my generation growing up, in *Dottie* and in *Far from Heaven*.

Well, I learned about the 1950s from the *films* of the period. People who lived through the 1950s have told me, after seeing *Far from Heaven*, "It was exactly *like* that!" During the production of *Far from Heaven* I was very rigid about the idea that we were recreating a Hollywood sound stage experience from the time. In fact, when we were looking for extras, many of the people we considered looked too much like *real* people from the 1950s, not like the sort of patrician, handsome, blonde, *movie* people that you see in the background of those Sirk films. So everything about *Far from Heaven* was filtered through a very self-conscious, *cinematic* depiction of the

period. It says a lot about the 1950s if my movie connects you to real memories and experiences.

I remember going to see Sirk's *Imitation of Life* [1959] at the huge Fox Theater in St. Louis. The climactic scene is the mother's funeral, where the daughter returns full of regret that she disowned her mother for so long, and throws herself on the coffin. During this scene, the theater was in a paroxysm of crying, but for my friend and me, the scene seemed utterly preposterous, ridiculously over the top. Actually, my friend Jerry burst into laughter and I thought we might have to fight our way out of the theater! But as a result, I never took Sirk seriously, at least until you brought him back to me with *Far from Heaven*. For me your film is actually New Improved Sirk, Sirk made credible.

When you were first seeing Sirk, did you take the films seriously?

I was first presented with Sirk in an entirely different context, an already elevated context—in college. I didn't have the experience of seeing the films when they first came out, or even of watching Sirk on late-night television like so many people did. My first experiences with Sirk were positioned as something of intellectual value—but I know exactly what you mean; even understanding the intellectual defense of Sirk, his films are difficult to watch. And for me *Imitation of Life* is one of the more accessible Sirk films emotionally.

There is something about melodrama that is unsatisfying, overdetermined, and under-explained. The characters in melodrama do not come to knowledge about their predicament; they are pushed along by the forces and mores of their societies, and ultimately they crumble under the pressure, against their own desires. You're supposed to want them to comply, because you know that that's the way movies get resolved, but you also feel, "No! Wait a minute! I thought you were in *love* with this person!" For many people this is exactly what makes melodrama radical: melodramatic films are not about people who are free agents, who are in control of their destiny; they're not like the protagonists of Westerns or gangster films, more male-associated genres where men have a kind of infinite freedom. Often the female subjects in melodramas are trapped, and so, even though they live in these hyper-artificial-looking environments, the characters are more like real people, who don't, in the end, have the strength to be heroes.

The characters in *Far from Heaven* do seem to learn and they do seem to change their lives.

They do and they don't. All three of the central characters are suffering in one way or another. I felt that it was really interesting to compare different levels of oppression in a particularly codified, repressed era. And ironically it's the gay man, Frank Whitaker [Dennis Quaid], who has the most freedom, and who gets closest to satisfying his desires, through hiding. He's not as intensely visible as Raymond the gardener [Dennis Haysbert], who has to move. But Cathy [Julianne Moore] is at the bottom of the hierarchy; she gives up the love object, loses the husband, and is left with the responsibility for the children.

As I was getting ready to shoot *Far from Heaven*, I thought, "How the hell are these actors going to deal with these roles?" and I remember Julianne Moore saying that Cathy was easy to perform because everything about her *is* on the surface; she really has no deeper psychological dimension. There's no Aristotelian conflict in these characters, who are too innocent and ill-equipped to deal with the big issues they confront. Julianne found that freeing.

You've made it clear, even in the opening credits, that *Poison* is based on three Jean Genet novels, but I can't help but see a connection to a Genet film, and one of the great avant-garde films: *Un chant d'amour* [1952].

Un chant d'amour is just so amazing, so radical. It's from 1949, right?

1952.

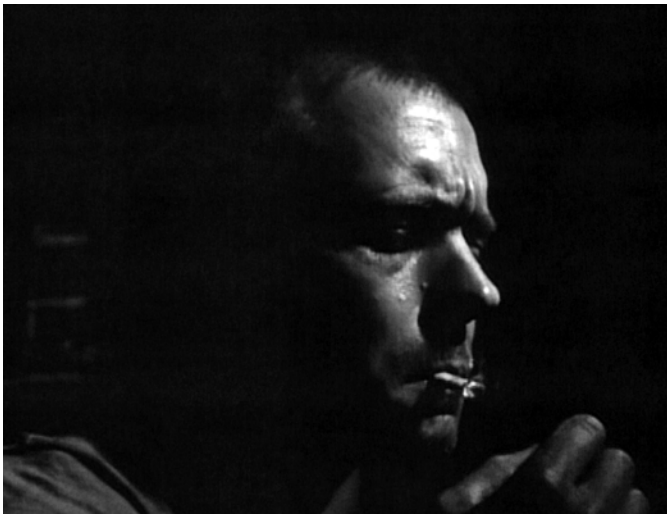
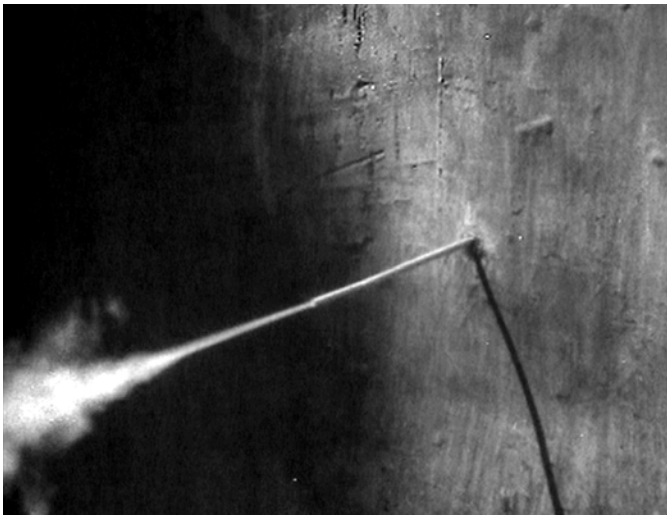
1952—so it came *after* Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks* [1947]! Oh, *that's* amazing, too.

Un chant d'amour is Genet's one film, and uses a prison setting. It has one of the most erotic and understated moments in all of cinema, the scene of one inmate putting a reed through the stone wall dividing him from his neighboring inmate and blowing smoke through this narrow reed so that the smoke comes out in the other inmate's cell where the neighbor inhales it. It's very simple, but so beautiful and powerful. And the film is an incredible, frank depiction of nudity and homoerotic imagery. It's exquisite. So yeah, *Un chant d'amour* was a kind of ghost text that inspired me in *Poison*. I didn't want to reenact any of it; its influence needed to be implicit, not amplified.

The scene of the men getting married in the "Homo" section of *Poison*, which I assume is a fantasy scene, evokes for me the fantasy sequence in *Un chant d'amour* where the men frolic in the woods.

That scene in *Poison* isn't a fantasy, actually. All the scenes depicted in and around that rustic courtyard refer to Genet's depictions of Metray, the penal colony he romanticizes in *Miracle of the Rose* and contrasts with the scenes of adult prison life at Fontenal—though Genet's romantic inversions have all the investment and desire of fantasy.

One of the early screenings of *Un chant d'amour* in this country was in San Francisco; it was shut down by the police, who confiscated the film. Saul Landau, who later was involved with the San Francisco Mime Troupe, wrote a brilliant defense of the film. It was the first important essay to be published in what would become a key publication for those interested in avant-garde cinema from the mid-1960s into the 80s: the *Canyon Cinemanews*. Landau had

Left: *Poison.* © 1990 Poison L.P. DVD: Alamode Film (Germany). Right: *Un chant d'amour.* © 1950 J. L. A. Audiovisuel/2007 Cult Epics.

courage; one of the first things he did after the brouhaha about the first screening was to show the film again, this time as a benefit for Kenneth Anger.

When did you first see *Fireworks* and also *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* [1954], a film that is about identity being multifarious and composite, a theme in much of your work?

I think I was first seeing Kenneth Anger films in college, or maybe even in high school. I forget which one I saw first, probably *Scorpio Rising* [1963]. The story behind *Fireworks* is so interesting. It was made in 1949, right?

1947.

Unbelievable. His parents are gone for the weekend and he and his friends make this radical, homoerotic, crazy, *beautiful* film.

It's the earliest openly gay film that I'm aware of. Kinsey was in the first public audience for the film, and, according to Anger, Kinsey bought the first print.

Then that film traveled to Europe, and Genet and Jean Cocteau and all those dudes had their screening of this Los Angeles teenager's film. Pretty remarkable.

Like *Scorpio Rising* and some other avant-garde films—Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* [1963] is a notable instance—*Poison* ran into trouble with "moral guardians," particularly because of its depiction of homosexuality.

The production of *Poison* was given a $25,000 grant by the National Endowment for the Arts. After the film was finished and won the prize at Sundance, there was a review by the *Hollywood Reporter* that misdescribed the film. *Poison* is made up of three stories—"Homo," "Hero," and "Horror." The review described the whole movie as if it were "Homo," as if the entire film was about anal sex in prison. Somehow, Donald Wildman of the American Family Association heard about the film and took up the cause, and several senators got involved. This was not long after the "NEA Four": Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck, performance artists who were given grants and then charged with inappropriate use of taxpayer money. In the end, their grants were rescinded.

Poison became the next in line for that kind of fame. All of a sudden I was on *Larry King* and all these other shows; and *no* politicians were supporting my position. Sometimes it was me and Dick Armey, or later, me and Ralph Reed, the head of the Christian Coalition. Many of the people attacking *Poison* hadn't even seen the film; they were just arguing that money shouldn't be put into public art that might offend American sensibilities. It wasn't a fair discussion: I was just the artist who made the film with a grant; and they were opposing the whole notion of giving artists grants. If we were going to have a discussion about the *film*, I could have spoken to that, I suppose; but since the issue was public funding of the arts, it would have made more sense to have a politician in favor of public support for artists, defending that position.

The best thing was that they had to have special screenings of *Poison* wherever senators and congresspeople go to see movies, so they could see what the controversy was all about. In the *Washington Times* I was called "the Fellini of Felatio"—a proud moment! One senator's wife said that watching *Poison* made her want to "bathe in Clorox" afterward. Pretty good press! I think this was the first time, or one of the first times, a *film* was the subject of questions about public support of the arts.

The controversy over Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* predates the flap over *Poison*.

That's true. These controversies are almost always about gay-related stuff.

At some point during the flap over *Poison*, Robert Redford wrote a letter to John Frohnmayer, the head of the NEA, that went something like: "Hey, John, I just want to speak up in favor of this homo-y movie that you have such problems with . . ." I think because of Redford's support and because *Poison* had the sanction of the Sundance Award, Frohnmayer finally had the nerve to stand up and defend the film.

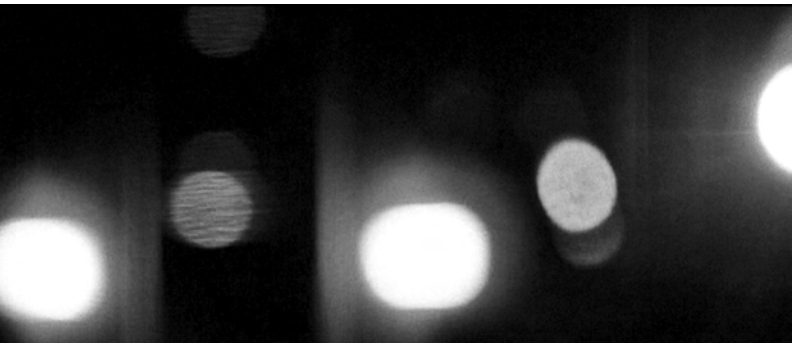
That's been my only big controversy, and really I'm happy to be part of the tradition of controversial films like *Un chant d'amour*, *Scorpio Rising*, *Flaming Creatures*, and *Tongues Untied*.

In *Velvet Goldmine* the character of Jack Fairy is pretty obviously an allusion to Jack Smith, who is increasingly considered not only an important avant-garde filmmaker (his *Flaming Creatures* is a crucial 1960s film), but the initiator of what's now called performance art, as well as a major influence on Warhol and so many others. Am I correct that you too see Smith that way?

Oh, absolutely. I love the famous stories of his performance pieces that would go on for days. They were like eastern traditions where you watch a Nō play for twelve hours or whatever. And I love the way his performing was woven into his life; living and performance weren't separated by a curtain or a proscenium.

I remember a Smith performance at the Times Square Show in 1980. Smith arrives and seems to be getting things ready for his performance, putting things where they need to be. The audience waits for what's going to happen. Half an hour goes by, and he's still getting ready; then it's an hour. Finally we realize that this is the performance: the process of seeming to get ready to perform is the performance.

Exactly—the line between life and art is erased. In so many ways that crazy intersection of experimental filmmaking, erotic film (it wasn't called porn in the mid-1960s), and feature filmmaking—that crazy commingling of all those traditions that produced a moment when people would line up



Fracturing narrative

I'm Not There. © 2007 VIP Medienfonds 4 GmbH & Co. KG. DVD: The Weinstein Company (U.K.).

around the block to see *Chelsea Girls* [1966]—reflected a desire in people to blur categories, including the separation between art and life, and "radical" and "mainstream." All the categories were in a state of flux. This produced not only extraordinary filmmakers, but active and essential audiences. We don't have audiences like that today.

One major theme, if not *the* major theme of your work, has been the quest to be free of identity, or at least of a simplistic sense of what identity is. This is reflected in your quest to be free of *cinematic* identity, your refusal to be restricted to one genre, one kind of presentation—a tendency obvious as early as *Superstar*. *I'm Not There* may be the ultimate instance. I get the sense that *I'm Not There* was an attempt to pay homage not just to Dylan's career and to his defiance of simple definitions of identity, but to the expansion of the American sense of film history that took place during the 1960s and 70s. You evoke so many dimensions of the cinema scene of that era. *I'm Not There* is a brilliant synthesis of commercial and avant-garde attitudes and approaches.

Well, thank you. I had an extraordinary period at my disposal for that film (even though, of course, Bob Dylan's career has gone way past the 1960s); there were *so* many formal and visual, cinematic and otherwise, experiments going on during that time, experiments that produced a remarkable array of work and so many possibilities.

The subject of Dylan was clearly an expansive one, and one that doesn't stop growing, given his profuse and unending output. In addition to this I was applying a structure that was expansive by design—the opposite, in my mind, of the traditional biopic's determination to reduce and simplify. So I knew from the start that I would need to impose some conceptual limits on the thing. And since most of the characters

I'd developed had their roots in the 1960s, an era as seminal to Dylan as he was to it, I decided to take that as my conceptual and stylistic sourcebook—though as creative limits go, the 1960s provided anything but. At the very least I could be guaranteed distinct and contrasting cinematic references for each of the stories that would all, still, come out of a period defined by experimentation, in effect the Vietnam years: 1964 through 1973.

How early in the process of conceiving *I'm Not There* did you know you would use a composite of many different kinds of filming, a weave of various cinematic approaches?

From conception. The specific cinematic references—the visualization of the film—was something I felt needed to be considered from the start, and would determine not only how the film would look, but how the script would be written.

During the Cate Blanchett story, you remind us of the Warhol Factory and the various forms of image-making that went on there. In other instances, you remind us of the hand-held, gestural 8mm and Super 8 filmmaking of that era. In still others, you show your awareness of breakthroughs in documentary work (Pennebaker's direct cinema work in *Don't Look Back* [1967], most obviously). How fully were you thinking of particular makers of one kind or another as you conceived the film? Or were you just channeling the general zeitgeist of that moment?

All of the references you mention were influences, along with many others. In the end the guiding cinematic references were not necessarily those that Dylan himself was directly associated with (like Pennebaker), but those that, to me, most closely illustrated what Dylan's music was doing at the time. For instance, the Jude story—Cate Blanchett's section—I'd initially pictured like *Don't Look Back*, in verité black-and-white. But this story was about the electric Dylan of late 1965 and 1966, the Dylan of *Highway 61* and *Blonde on Blonde*—a period in his music that was about as far from "social realism" or verité as one could get. So Fellini—and particularly 8½ [1963], a film whose rich baroque and urban ironies became the perfect conduit to *Blonde on Blonde*—replaced Pennebaker as the leading stylistic reference for that story (with some Richard Lester, Pennebaker, and William Klein thrown in, as well). Elsewhere the references are nearly as specific: early Godard for the Robbie [Heath Ledger] story; the hippie Westerns of the late 1960s and early 70s for Billy [Richard Gere]; black-and-white experimental minimalism for Arthur [Ben Wishaw]; leftist studio filmmaking—from *Face in the Crowd* [Elia Kazan, 1957] to *Bound for Glory* [Hal Ashby, 1976] for Woody [Marcus Carl Franklin].

Of course, the ways in which one particular artist has dodged the fixing of identity that the culture always seems to demand (and that so many people still struggle to fulfill, feel they need to fulfill) is certainly not confined to that particular era. There was more of an audience for experimenting with identity in the 1960s, but the issue itself hasn't changed so much. Of course, I knew from the beginning that whatever happened to *I'm Not There* in today's world market couldn't be the same as what was happening then, couldn't be—and that was fine. But I also didn't want to limit the range of possibilities suggested by *I'm Not There* because of today's different audience; as fully as possible, I wanted to honor the exuberance of that time and make it accessible. *I'm Not There* had fantastic actors and that helped to root a lot of people within the narrative fracture of the film, and the music gives a lot of people access as well.

***I'm Not There* didn't do as well as we might have hoped.**

I was completely satisfied with the reception. Critically it was really well-received, more than I would have thought, and that felt bizarre and exciting. All in all, it was a surprising year for American film, and *I'm Not There* was in the company of a lot of interesting work. If the film was going to get such generous critical reaction, it would probably have done better in a less exciting year. But I was happy to see great commercial films by interesting directors coming out for the first time in what seemed like a decade—and then look what happened! In one year four major independent film companies folded.

Also, the ancillary possibility for DVD sales is disappearing: people download now. This is a really curious time for independent filmmaking. I just bought the great Criterion edition of *Berlin Alexanderplatz* [1983]: I hadn't seen it since the late 1980s. Fassbinder's films have been hugely influential on me and they still amaze and exhaust me. *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has become interesting to me again in part because I'm just now thinking about doing something in an episodic format, a long, multiple-part piece for television.

SCOTT MACDONALD is author of the five-volume series, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (University of California Press). He teaches at Hamilton College and Harvard University.

ABSTRACT In this interview, director Todd Haynes discusses the influence on his films (notably *Superstar, Poison, Dottie Gets Spanked, Far from Heaven,* and *I'm Not There*) of the avant-garde tradition from Jean Genet to Stan Brakhage to Leslie Thornton to Sally Potter.

KEYWORDS Todd Haynes, *Superstar, I'm Not There,* avant-garde film, queer cinema

DR. HORRIBLE'S SING-ALONG BLOG

Last year saw the rise of a new supervillain, Dr. Horrible, who was motivated less by malice than by a desire to make the world a better place—albeit on his terms. As the man with the plan put it, "it's really important that as things change, they change for the better, and *Dr Horrible* is about that, it's about putting power in different hands—the wrong hands" (doctorhorrible.net). The man was Joss Whedon, creator of the television shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*, and *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, a forty-two-minute tongue-in-cheek musical, is his experiment in original online content; the "wrong hands" belong to the story's creators and consumers, as opposed to entertainment corporations. The project, which tells the story of aspiring villain Dr. Horrible's bid to remold the world and win a girl's heart, and the efforts of superhero Captain Hammer to beat him in both areas, was conceived as a way of working during the 2007 writers' strike. It turned out to be the dispute's most successful by-product—and some confirmation of the thesis proposed in this column (spring 2008) that "one consequence of the strike . . . will likely be that the development of autonomous online entertainment programming is accelerated."

Whedon's TV shows have included playfully experimental episodes in which the lead character is transformed into a puppet (*Angel*'s "Smile Time"), half an hour passes without a line of dialogue (*Buffy*'s "Hush"), or the whole script is sung (*Buffy*'s "Once More, With Feeling"—the most obvious precursor to *Dr. Horrible*). A supervillain musical comedy is thus Whedonesque (to borrow the adjective that the writer uses as the name of his website), though he might have struggled to get the concept greenlit for TV. But he recognized that silly ideas do well online: "from *Star Wars* kid, to 'The Landlord,' to 1,500 prisoners doing 'Thriller' . . . the absurd (which is important to me, as an Absurdist) is part of the Internet's identity" (*Los Angeles Times* "Web Scout" blog, July 15, 2008).

Buffy, which debuted in 1997, was one of the first TV shows to attract a large, co-ordinated, and influential online fanbase, which discussed plot developments and offered sustained critiques of the series' subtext and erotic slash fiction. Online fandom affected *Buffy*'s development—"for a while I used it as my Nielsen ratings," Whedon told the Writers Guild magazine *Written By* (January 2009)—and has remained loyal; though its lobbying failed to save *Firefly* from cancellation, it did assure the production of a spin-off movie, *Serenity*. It was therefore unsurprising that *Dr. Horrible* was launched in March with associated MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter pages, and that three months later its creator used Whedonesque to announce more details and encourage fans to spread the word. "Proving we can turn *Dr Horrible* into a viable economic proposition as well as an awesome goof will only inspire more people to lay themselves out in the same way."

In developing the ideas, Whedon drew on the expertise of *Buffy* cast member Felicia Day, creator of the online sitcom *The Guild*. Having run into Day on the writers' picket line, he asked her advice and eventually cast her as Penny, the girl for whom both Horrible (Neil Patrick Harris) and Hammer (*Firefly*'s Nathan Fillion) fall. Whedon also stumped up the $200,000 budget himself and secured permission to use the Universal Studios backlot. Able to ignore conventional TV running times ("We aimed for 30 minutes, we came out at 42, and that's not a problem," he told the website tubefilter.tv), he nevertheless decided to ape television distribution models by uploading the three acts for free viewing over the course of a week, and then making them available for retail via iTunes and DVD sales. (The series is now viewable online for free in the U.S., with advertising.)

As its title suggests, *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* also engaged with the Web as subject matter. "We're long past the age of 'everybody on the Internet watches *Star Trek* and lives in their parents' basement,'" Whedon told the *Los Angeles Times*. "But there is a modern societal truth about the kind of guy who needs to tell the world his troubles and show off his talents." The opening scene featured the eponymous villain in front of his webcam, practising his evil laugh ("I'm working with a vocal coach"), going through emails from fans and haters, and encouraging word-of-mouth about his new endeavors, just as Whedon himself had. "This is the one," our enthusiastic antihero says, brandishing a weapon. "Stops time. Freeze ray. Tell your friends." In the following act, bruised, he bemoans the downside of online engagement: "I also need to be slightly more careful about what I say on this blog. Apparently the LAPD and Captain Hammer are among our viewers." This is Internet entertainment through and through. The freeze ray itself calls to mind both the frustrations of buffering delays, and the time for thought allowed by conversing via email or messenger rather than in person or by telephone.

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Whedonesque

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The three acts were posted to Hulu, the TV and movie streaming content site, on July 15, 17, and 19, 2008. Demand for the first was sufficient to crash the whole Hulu site as well as Whedonesque and the homepages for *Dr. Horrible* and *The Guild*. Hulu was also bombarded with complaints from overseas Web users unable to access the site's content, which is streamed only in the U.S. (an exception was negotiated). The popularity, accommodated with increased bandwidth, continued for the other acts, which remained available for free until midnight on July 20. When made available for sale on iTunes, *Dr. Horrible* topped the download chart. A soundtrack CD also made the iTunes Top 40 and, when released on DVD, the series reached number two on Amazon's chart. (The DVD was also notable for its sung-through commentary track, including a song called "Strike!" about the production's origins: "As the fall turns to winter / There appears a bunch of splinter / Groups who wonder what this inter- / Net is like . . .")

The revenue generated (there have also been comic books and other spin-off merchandise) more than recouped the project's production costs, including the deferred union-rate salaries of its cast and crew. As no precedent was available, the Writers Guild of America and Screen Actors Guild had suggested the rates applied to online ancillary material—"webisodes"—produced to promote TV shows; Whedon also volunteered a profit-sharing scheme. At the same time, the relationship with the show's fans was maintained through online updates. (A Twitter message in early January read: "Canadians. Sorry, we're as confused by this amazon.ca situation as you are. Trying to get to the bottom of it." The problem, related to the DVD release, was resolved.) Fan loyalty led to the series winning a People's Choice Award and Whedon announcing plans for a fourth act.

Dr. Horrible established, then, the potential profitability of original online content—even if its success was rooted in private funding and a devoted pre-existing fanbase, boons unavailable to most aspiring content producers. But the generosity of spirit—the unhorribleness, if you like—with which Whedon and his collaborators set about their scheme should give the entertainment corporations pause. In an interview posted on www.wga.org, Whedon expressed interest in funding others' ideas, "being an internet Roger Corman. He's responsible for a slew of the greatest directors of the last couple decades, because he was the only B-movie system that there was." On July 28 at the San Diego Comic-Con, fandom's premier gathering, Whedon told his fans that *Dr. Horrible* "was designed to be a model for a new way to put out media, an artistic community that involves all of you guys, and all of us, and maybe not so much . . . other people." His tone was more knowing smile than evil laugh, but it should still send shivers down corporate spines.

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DVD DATA *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*. Director: Joss Whedon. © 2008 Mutant Enemy. Publisher: Mutant Enemy, 2008. $14.99, 1 disc.

FOUND SOUND, CINEMA WITHOUT CINEMA

London Film Festival Artists' Film and Video Weekend (BFI Southbank)

The London Film Festival Artists' Film and Video Weekend has a semi-occult existence. Officially it is an unnamed part of the Festival's Experimenta strand; unofficially, through a network of London-based mailing lists, the weekend of compilation programs was known until last year as the "Avant-Garde Weekend." This year, for the first time it became the "Artists' Film and Video Weekend."

Does it matter? "Artists' Film and Video" is a less contentious term than "Avant-Garde"; importantly, it is also more open to the continuing interest of gallerists and curators. Nevertheless, the weekend, programmed by Mark Webber, continues to feel like experimental cinema rather than high art. Films are presented in more-or-less two-hour sessions and watched in a darkened auditorium, from beginning to end. And if the program is recognizably within the tradition of the historical avant-garde, the most recent offering (October 25–26, 2008) also demonstrated that the inevitable overlapping and blurring of lines has less to do with curatorial terminology than filmmaking practice.

Fittingly, the weekend began with Nicky Hamlyn's *Four Toronto Films* (2007), which rework some concerns of structural film. In the first piece, concrete slabs between two intersections form a series of physical frames-within-the-frame of the camera, recording duration through the angle of the tripod's shadow. In another, the relationship between camera and world is pulled to pieces in a furious time-lapse day at Koshlong Lake. Sami Van Ingen's *Deep Six* (2006) takes a similarly material approach, but to found footage. Contact-printing color photocopies of frames from exploitation movie *The Rage* (1997), he brings perforations and frame lines into play in an expanded widescreen, exploring the transformation of image through technique. By re-editing moments from the film itself into a microscopic parody of the three-act structure, he simultaneously satirizes form and content.

Also working with found, or "redeemed" footage, Sylvia Schedlebauer creates in *Remote Intimacy* (2008) an imagistic history of an imaginary stateless person. Intertitles and scenes of ocean-going ships create a fictional narrative of transition and loss. Though the images are drawn from found-footage guru Craig Baldwin's archive, in a question-and-answer session after the screening, Schedlebauer herself intriguingly called attention to the provenance of the movie's soundtrack, largely drawn from the Freesound project (www.freesound.org), an audio archive of material freely available under the Creative Commons licence.

Nicky Hamlyn, *Four Toronto Films* (top). Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin, Lossless #2.

Courtesy London Film Festival.

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"Found sound" creeps into Phil Solomon's *Last Days in a Lonely Place* (2007), part of a personal tribute to the late Mark Lapore, whose mesmerizing *Kolkata* (2005) played during the weekend two years ago. *Last Days in a Lonely Place* is machinima, created in *Grand Theft Auto*, but devoid of typically reflexive nods to the medium. A single character occupies lonely, marginal spaces away from the action, the game's palette reduced to muddy black-and-white. As pixellated rain falls, we repeatedly return to a deserted filmhouse whose awning is devoid of any titles: a melancholy cinema without cinema. Meanwhile, unplaceable moments from other soundtracks are heard. "When will the world end?" a voice asks. "At dawn," it answers itself.

Approaching our apprehension of film history from a very different angle, Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin's *Lossless #2* (2008) takes as its starting point the fact that while a contemporary education in avant-garde film is more easily available than ever through online video from Ubuweb to YouTube, the quality of such digital intermediates is frequently poor. Using Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) to illustrate the ravages of digital compression, *Lossless #2* is far from the dry academic study of decaying pixels that it could be. As one Maya melts and disappears into a characteristically digital blocking artifact, another emerges from her shadow, adding a further dimension of liquidity and interruption to Deren's original poem of multiplied identity.

While Webber's organization of the films themselves into programs is at best thematically abstract (Hamlyn's and Solomon's films appeared in "A Sense of Place," while Schedlebauer's appeared in "The Word for World is Forest"), and at worst random, the majority of films shown belong to the canonical tradition of experimental cinema. That the tradition continues to develop is beyond doubt: Schedlebauer's attention to audio, the reappropriation of digital surrogates, and the use of videogames are all fertile directions. However, this year's program also included several films whose starting point is documentary, rather than narrative or formal film.

Working in St. Petersburg, Alina Rudnitskaya produces short, closely observed micro-documentaries about small groups of women. *Amazons* (2003) follows a young woman joining a horse and pony stable whose members make a living offering rides to wealthier children. *Besame Mucho* (2006) intersperses scenes of an opera rehearsal with moments from the lives of the late-middle-aged female singers: the everyday difficulty of life as working women, and the attendant medical, financial, and romantic problems. *Bitch Academy* (2008), the most recent and complex work, focuses on a class learning to be "strong women." The teacher is a man, but there is no other sign of the male world that has undermined these women's confidence; rather we see the interpersonal relationships of the women themselves. When the teacher breaks the spell of passive observation and invites his students to respond to and focus on Rudnitskaya's cameraman, it does little to undermine the overall effect of her concentration on the awkwardness of women themselves.

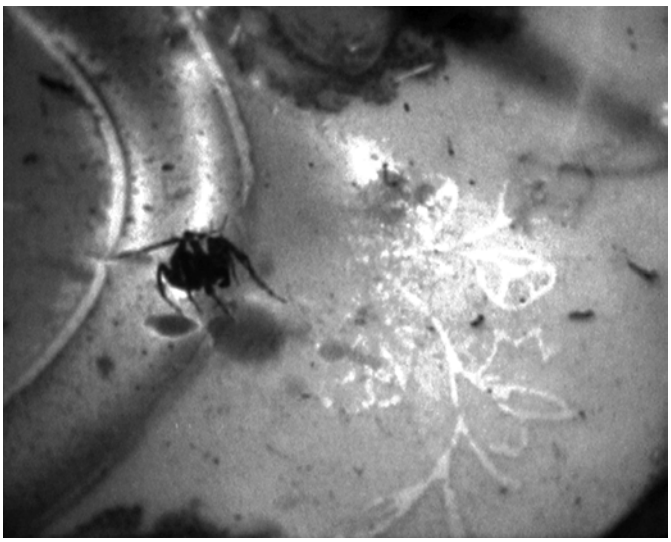
If Rudnitskaya's work might be more easily categorized as "documentary" than "artists' film," neither Brigid McCaffrey and Ben Russell's *Tjúba Tén* (2008), nor Neil Beloufa's *Kempinski* (2007) could fully be considered documentary, though both begin from the observation of life. *Tjúba Tén* seems at first to be an anthropological record of traditional cultural practices in Suriname. We see farming, food preparation, and craft work. But the recordings are silent, or untranslated: it is hard to fully understand what is going on. In between these scenes the picture disappears, and we hear the voices, translated in subtitles, of the film's subjects, debating the value to their own community of the recordings. One woman sees the film as a safeguard against

Alina Rudnitskaya, *Besame Mucho* (top), *Bitch Academy.*

Courtesy London Film Festival.

the loss of the knowledge her mother and grandmother had. Situations mostly unfamiliar to the audience, such as weaving and clearing land, give way to ones superficially more recognizable: a shop, a party with amplified music, but without any greater sense of understanding. McCaffrey and Russell's implication seems to be that no anthropological investigation can break free from the relationship between its subject and the viewer.

Kempinksi goes further. In this short French-Malian film, participants are framed by the lighting rigs which illuminate them, and hold fluorescent lights in their hands, as they talk about the future in the present tense, from their own houses and gardens. The participants' vision is neither superficially technologically western nor stereotypically African animist, but a curious mixture of the two. One man imagines a world in which animals have merged with human beings, and that he is married to a cow. Another imagines a world driven by thought alone. The film's title is that of a hotel chain; together with its subtitle ("the future in present tense"), an eerie sense of simultaneous otherness emerges.



Neil Beloufa, *Kempinski* (top). Ben Rivers, *Astika*.

Courtesy London Film Festival.

Ben Rivers is an artist whose work is seen in both cinemas and galleries: a full house on a Sunday evening for a program of his work indicated Rivers's current status as a hot property. The subjects of his films, on the other hand, are physically and socially marginal, occupying unfamiliar spaces and holding strange opinions. The eponymous subject of *Astika* (2007) has allowed the farmland around him to grow wild as an experiment, but is on the verge of eviction and considering suicide. Septuagenarian "S" in *Origin of the Species* (2008) is a man obsessed by the Darwinian theory of human evolution, living at a great distance from other human beings, an irony Rivers subtly draws out. Even where the films' subjects are not totally alone, such as the children of a remote highland farm in *Ah, Liberty!* (2008) or Rivers's friend's father Oleg in *A World Rattled of Habit* (2008), they have all been chosen for their separation from the world that most of the films' audience lives in. Rivers's non-synchronized sounds (the voices of his subjects, or music heard through radios and tape players) and use of a 16mm Bolex camera would call to mind the methods and tactics of Free Cinema were it not for both his artisanal approach (hand-developing his films), and the tendency of his camera to escape the subject and capture instead the incidental details of life: a dead mouse, a pile of discarded computing equipment, a deckchair in an overgrown garden.

While it's an undeniable joy to attend, as a survey of the state of the art the Experimenta weekend always runs the risk of becoming unwieldy. Wisely, Webber's program tends rather toward his personal vision. However, there are certainly omissions: this year more than ever there has been a distinct lack of performance-based, or overtly political, material. Notwithstanding the inclusiveness of "film and video," performance and politics are found more frequently on tape than celluloid, but less frequently of late in the LFF. One filmmaker in particular who seems curiously absent this year is John Smith. But there's also a logic to the program which demonstrates that whatever you call it, the territory which experimental film occupies is never quite stable: this year, it seems that if the art gallery is still making moves on the moving image, then experimental cinema itself is placing one boot firmly in the garden of documentary.

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AVANT-GARDE SHOWS, MASSACHUSETTS 2008

Jenny Holzer (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art)
Chantal Akerman (MIT List Visual Art Center)
Harriet Casdin-Silver (Gallery NAGA)

MassMOCA (www.massmoca.org), as the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art is known, often commissions works on a grand scale; Jenny Holzer's piece, *PROJECTIONS* (December 2007–November 2008), was the most impressive use of a massive space to create and exhibit a single work that I can recall. It was also the first indoor light-projection piece the artist has presented in this country, filling the darkened interior of a room the size of a football field with a sixty-foot-high ceiling with texts slowly and simultaneously unscrolling from two projectors at the far ends. As each of the texts appeared inverted from the opposite side, the words washed against each other in a crosscurrent, but they were never illegible, even when reshaped or fragmented in distinct ways by two elements. The first element was structural: ceiling beams that rigidly broke the smooth procession of the lines of text witnessed at ground level. The second was sculptural: Holzer installed a dozen large beanbag cushions that gave the appearance of gigantic pebbles or loaves of bread; over these furnishings (which doubled as seating) the words glided in sinuous curves.

The apparatus used is filmic but unconventional. *PROJECTIONS* employed a Pigi Manual Double Scroller, a device which projects a strip of acetate several inches wide, upon which the text was printed. Pigis are five times brighter than the best video projectors, have widely variable speed control and other features, and are often used for large public events (such as the 2000 Sydney Olympics opening ceremony).

In most of her earlier works—from wall pieces to LED signs—Holzer was author of her own pithy commentaries, but here she made use of words written by others: the German novelist Elfriede Jelinek during my visit and, earlier, the Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska. To my mind, the artist's expectation was not that a viewer read these as continuous texts, but rather pay attention to individual words—"bloody shards," "razor," "bestiality"—that evoked themes of violence

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Jenny Holzer, ***PROJECTIONS***.

© MassMOCA. Photo: Arthur Evans.

with political overtones, themes that were underscored by a series of wall hangings in adjacent spaces which dissected the invasion of Iraq and, most chillingly, offered a declassified document, which she entitled "Wish List," detailing military interrogation techniques such as striking prisoners with telephone directories.

A fluid work, *PROJECTIONS* was also immersive, a stream of insistent but soothing light. Though it revealed different aspects depending on one's vantage point and therefore encouraged a contemplative viewing, I noticed a number of families with young children who enjoyed the piece in a more casual and mobile way.

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The MIT List Visual Art Center (listart.mit.edu) is the university's venue for contemporary art, presenting five to eight exhibitions each year in its gallery, as well as overseeing the campus's outdoor sculptures, an art loan program for students, and, in an administrative building, the Media Test Wall, a video projection display. The List's shows frequently involve new media, the most ambitious of the recent ones being *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, which engaged all of the senses, including smell.

Chantal Akerman—Moving Through Time and Space, the first American retrospective of the acclaimed French film and videomaker, co-organized by the List, ran May 2–

July 6. Since 1995, Akerman has worked in multichannel video installations that often recycle footage from her earlier films, thereby rupturing their linear continuity. The movies themselves have been difficult to place firmly into one genre or another, as Akerman combines fiction, documentary, and personal reflection. She works with a minimal visual vocabulary—largely static and tracking shots—but there is an exquisite sense of composition.

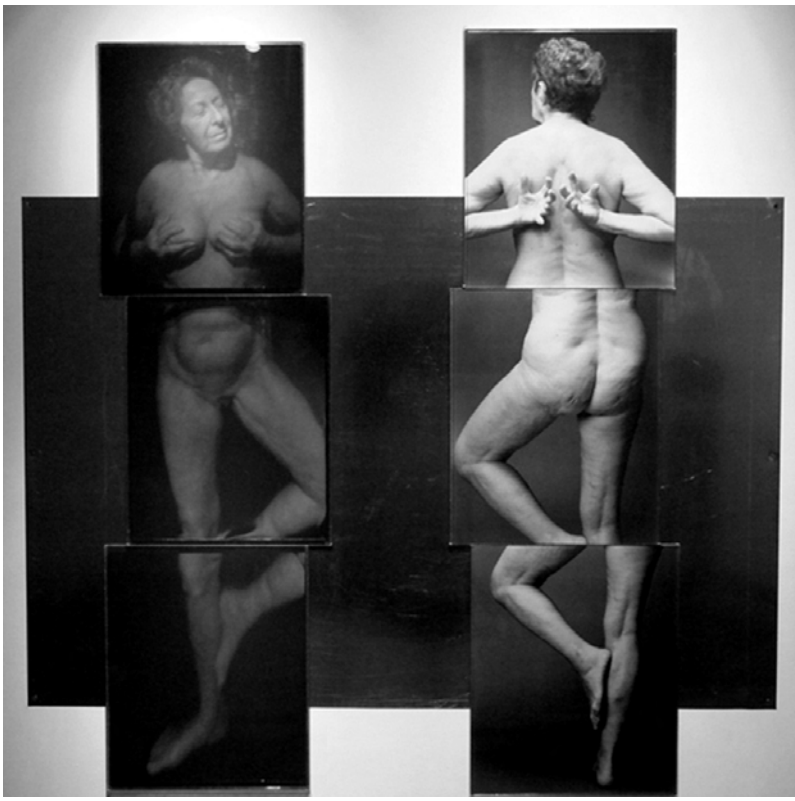
Of the five works presented in the show, two were complete films: *South* (*Sud*, 1999), and *Down There* (*Là-bas*, 2005), displayed via video projection on a regular schedule in separate screening rooms. The other three works were installations. Both *From the East* (*D'est*, 1995), and *From the Other Side* (*De l'autre côté*, 2002) were derived from earlier films that were totally transformed in the installation format. Both pieces were staged in similar ways, each occupying three gallery spaces, in the first of which the original film was shown in full. The second housed twenty-four monitors, arrayed in groups of three, with each set playing a different segment of the film along with its largely ambient soundtrack. These looped sequences were of different durations, such that the pieces rarely, if ever, repeated their cycles in precisely the same way twice; they were nevertheless rhythmically organized, and striking in their visual and sonic arrangements. The third space was intimate, with a single monitor placed near the floor and Akerman's voice on speakers reading parts of the Torah in Hebrew or excerpts from her diary.

From the East was shot on a trip to Eastern Europe, homeland of Akerman's family, and consisted mainly of continuous pans over busy streets. Sometimes pedestrians notice the camera and one gets a sense that Akerman both belongs to this world and is alien to it. The theme of displacement is directly addressed in *From the Other Side*, set on the U.S./Mexican border and including nighttime aerial footage of confrontations between illegal immigrants and the American patrol.

The third installation, *Women From Antwerp in November* (*Femmes d'Anvers en novembre*) was commissioned specially for this exhibition and is probably the most successful of the pieces. *Women* is about the psychological and emotional re-

Chantal Akerman, *De l'autre côté* (*From the Other Side*), installation view.

Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris.



Harriet Casdin-Silver, *Coda* (left), 70+1+2.

Courtesy of Gallery NAGA, Boston.

lationships between its subjects and their cigarettes. It is a silent two-channel work, one screen consisting of five panels of women puffing away, mainly out of doors alone or in small groups, and displaying a range of emotional states—from the placid and introspective to the overwrought and hysterical. These are mysterious vignettes, sometimes repeated, pieces of unknown narratives.

On the facing wall was a single large screen of one woman languorously consuming a cigarette in a four-minute monochrome loop. Breaking from her trademark style, here the artist's camera moves in extreme close-up, following the cigarette from lips to ashtray. The subject's expression is serene, providing a contrast to the more turbulent faces on the opposite wall.

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Harriet Casdin-Silver of Brookline, Massachusetts, is a prominent, internationally recognized holographic artist, who died in March 2008. A modest exhibition of five of her works was on display in June and July at the commercial Gallery NAGA (www.gallerynaga.com) in Boston. Two of these were movies of a sort, both of them portraits of the artist's face. In *Gargoyle* (1992), the artist, viewed straight on, has her eyes closed. But as one passes by, they open as her head eerily pivots to the side. *Coda* (1992–2000) functions similarly, but the plate itself was damaged in processing, such that a portion of it is obscured by a jagged, blackened surface, combining abstraction and naturalism without sacrificing the illusion of motion. *Coda* also exemplifies Casdin-Silver's playful, experimental nature in that she chose to retain it in her corpus of work rather than simply discard it as a failure.

The other three holographic pieces were all static, but one is particularly noteworthy. From the outset of her career, Casdin-Silver was a feminist; her politics are evident in the diptych *70+1+2* (1998), which is also a celebration of aging. Two columns of three panels are side by side, the one on the right displaying Casdin-Silver's nude form conventionally photographed from behind, and the other a frontal holographic rendering of her seventy-four-year-old unclad figure caressing herself with an ecstatic sense of subdued eroticism.

JOHN MINKOWSKY's most recent publication is "Framing the Mind in the Museum," in *Buffalo Heads: Media Study, Media Practice, Media Pioneers, 1973–1990* (MIT Press, 2008).

WHAT MAKES FILMS HISTORICAL?

ALAN NADEL

Whatever else has been said about that troubling admixture of home movie, testimony (true or false), and pederasty (alleged or actual) that comprises the documentary *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003), the film was possible only because of the Friedman family's fascination with filming, such that their home movies became the enduring matter of lives bereft of almost everything else. That fascination reflects the perception that, unlike words, film/video/moving pictures *capture* something. This premise holds as well for *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), a fictional film promoted as salvaged footage recorded by three young filmmakers attempting to investigate allegedly haunted woods in Maryland. The footage chronicles their inability to escape the woods, and the effects of unseen events that cause the disappearance (death?) of each. While the hyped (albeit bogus) authenticity of the footage made it a box-office success, that ploy may be less interesting than how the film explores a cinematic understanding of reality and national identity, as it contrasts the growing desperation of characters who, like the Friedmans, compulsively look into (either end of) a camera to validate their experience. The doomed filmmakers and comparably doomed Friedmans become characters in a horror story, fixating on making movies while they are losing their bearings. The Blair filmmakers, perhaps speaking as well for the Friedmans, repeatedly assert that if they persist they can't be lost because "this is America!" The people in both films turn relentlessly to the camera for a real life. To the extent that the camera makes their presence historic at the same moment that history obscures their existence, they are trapped at a genre crossroads where visual authenticity meets fairy-tale narrative: the impossible space delimited by the "historical film."

That space, explored by all the books at hand, exists because a visual record suggests, for some, authenticity unavailable in print. "Somewhere outside the confining walls of these words," writes historian Robert Rosenstone in *History on Film/Film on History*, "lies a world of colour, movement, sound, light, and life, a world on screen that points towards, refers to, represents" (1). From this premise, Rosenstone argues that specific films are works of history. In the post-Hayden White era of historiography, Rosenstone believes, history cannot claim accuracy because it is as much informed by narrative conventions and current tropes as by research and subject matter, although "film will never be able to do precisely what a book can do, and vice versa . . . history presented in these two different media would ultimately have to be judged by different criteria" (7).

This truism anchors not only Rosenstone's work but, to varying degrees, all these works, which use him as reference or inspiration. J. G. Smyth, in *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema from "Cimarron" to "Citizen Kane"*, supports Rosenstone by providing histories of several Hollywood historical films produced between World War I and World War II. William Guynn, in *Writing History in Film*, makes theoretical arguments for the claims that Smyth makes empirically, and Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky assemble essays in *Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film* to suggest "the unexplored *potential* of films to convey the intensity and complexity of history" (vii). Film's pedagogical power focuses *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* by Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper, who ostensibly share Rosenstone's perspective, but in effect treat films chiefly as symptomatic of the moment and ideology that produced them.

Partially incorporating and partially ignoring it, Rosenstone identifies three broad ways to represent history: dramatic film, documentary, innovative film. "The dramatic film aims directly at the emotions" (16), while the documentary "tells a linear and moral story" (17), and the opposition or innovative historical film "constitutes a baggy category" (18). The chapters that follow elaborate upon each of these types, drawing profitably both on Rosenstone's expertise as a historian and his previous work on the subject—a collection of essays, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our*

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Idea of History (Harvard University Press, 1995) and an edited volume, *Revisioning History: Filmmakers and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton University Press, 1995). "The mainstream feature tells the past as a story" that is "a unitary, closed, and completed past," a story that "insists on history as the story of individual men or women . . . personalizes, dramatizes, and emotionalizes the past . . . gives us the 'look' of the past, of buildings, landscapes, costumes, and artifacts" (47), and "shows history as process" (48). A film's inaccuracies, therefore, are endemic to the process of "'staging' the past" (39). That "staging"—the function of the compression, displacement, alteration, dialogue, and characterization that comprise drama—allows film to speak "in a language that is metaphorical and symbolic" (48). Eisenstein's *October* (1928), an "innovative drama," thus privileges a metaphoric understanding of the past and exemplifies films that seek "a new vocabulary [in order to] render history . . . more complex, interrogative, and self-conscious" (51).

Challenging the credit that historians tend to cede traditional documentaries, Rosenstone praises less traditional ways of documenting the past, employing his formidable knowledge of the Spanish Civil War (Rosenstone co-authored the narration of one film) to compare documentaries about that historical event. Rosenstone applies similar expertise to biopics about John Reed, the American journalist famous for his sympathetic account of the Bolshevik revolution. Privileging figurative over literal, Rosenstone praises *Reds* (1981) for conveying what I would call the "gist" of the past, and in subsequent chapters he praises Oliver Stone as historian, and insightfully scrutinizes the problems of representing Hitler through his response to viewing films on the Holocaust made in the 1990s. While acknowledging that "so much happens within the motion picture frame that the details contained in these eight films deny any real possibility of a neat and adequate summary" (152), he argues that the great potential of the film medium to simulate witnessing, allows the movies to "add an important experiential quality" (153). Although Rosenstone lauds film's visual literalism at the same time as he values its figurative import, he makes no apologies for his methodological inconsistency because "it is like history, itself, for ultimately no single agreed-upon method has ever been devised for representing the past" (10).

The idea—implicit in all of Rosenstone's arguments—that *proving* something is "history" valorizes it, lends a polemic quality to all these books. Hence, that it stimulates interest in the past makes a film history; that it excites audiences or has a narrative structure makes it history; that it employs tropes, has written intertitles, or raises questions about conventional wisdom all make films history. For Smyth, the importance of Hollywood historical films is that they interrogate received ideas of the past, and for Robert Toplin it is that cinematic history "often excites the viewer's curiosity" (*Lights*, 127). *Gangs of New York* (2002), Daniel Nathan, Peter Berg, and Erin Klemyk argue, while melodramatic and manipulative, can communicate "the texture and furor of the past" (*Lights*, 106). As a group, therefore, these books can be seen as an effort to stress the authenticity of historical films so as to exonerate them from the sin of inaccuracy. Toplin and Smyth, for example, point out the commercial constraints under which historical filmmakers labor, constraints Smyth carefully and admirably documents in extensive discussions of over two dozen films. If these authors use history as a legitimizing rubric, they are doing the same thing, Smyth convincingly shows, as many producers and writers in the heyday of studio production.

Steeped in production notes, memos, and production and reception history, *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema* identifies the "historical film" based on the attitude that defined its inception, development, and overall effect. Not an arbitrary, retrospective classification, the category "historical film" denotes a conscious decision affecting every aspect of the film's production and marketing, usually privileging prestige over profits. Producers chose writers committed to research that might undermine the clichéd notions of the past rather than perpetuate a jingoistic national ethos or repeat "transhistorical narratives" (116). Thus a Cecil B. DeMille period piece stands in direct contrast to such

BOOK DATA

American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film by Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005. $62.00 cloth; $22.95 paper. 240 pages.

History on Film/Film on History by Robert Rosenstone. Harlow, U.K.: Pearson Education, 2006. $33.33 paper. 200 pages.

Lights, Camera, History: Portraying the Past in Film, ed. Richard Francaviglia and Jerry Rodnitzky. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007. $35.00 cloth; $19.95 paper. 138 pages.

Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From "Cimarron" to "Citizen Kane" by J. E. Smyth. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006. $50.00 cloth. 464 pages.

Writing History in Film by William Guynn. New York: Routledge, 2006. $100.00 cloth; $26.95 paper. 232 pages.

historical films as *Cimarron* (1931), *Scarface* (1932), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Sergeant York* (1941), or *A Star Is Born* (1954), films in which "producers and directors turned their backs on traditional views of the past and a canon of American heroes" (23).

Organizing her chapters around specific historical subgenres, and arranging those chapters in roughly chronological order, Smyth provides a fascinating history of a Hollywood when producers, more than directors, controlled the texture of American film. *Cimarron*, a historical Western, differed distinctly from the typically mythic Westerns prior to the 1930s, she shows, as did *Scarface* and *The Public Enemy* (1931) from typical gangster films. The nature of frontier expansion, as reflected by films such as *Annie Oakley* (1935) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (1936), contrasts with the end-of-the-decade retrenchment from historical complexity, which promoted narratives of an "epic America." Although some include *Stagecoach* (1939) in this trend, Smyth connects the film to the "historical innovations" (117) of the 1930s, noting specifically the way that director John Ford "truly subverted traditional forms of audience identification in his presentation of Geronimo and the Chiricahua perspective" (123). To examine Hollywood's historical treatment of the Civil War, Smyth considers both Southern films, such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Jezebel* (1938), and films dealing with Lincoln. She also looks at reflections of World War I and the historicizing of Hollywood. An almost elegiac final chapter links the "decline and fall of *Citizen Kane*" to the decline of the historical film genre, on the verge of U.S. entry into World War II.

Smyth's accumulation of details reveals an important quarter-century struggle over the function of history in film and the role film would play in describing the American past. In this context, Smyth's representative heroes include producers Daryl F. Zanuck, David O. Selznick, Jack Warner, screenwriters Nunnally Johnson, Robert Buckner, and directors William Wellman and Ford, while producer-director DeMille plus censors Will Hays and Joseph Breen represent the Hollywood establishment's anti-historical impetus. The historical film thus emerged from endless negotiation: within the studio, between the studio and the industry, and in the case of contemporary history or adaptations of contemporary works, negotiations over intellectual property and/or defamation.

More controversially, Smyth identifies "revisionism" as an important asset of the historical film. What helps make *Cimarron* historical, she claims, is that it "confronts American myths rather than memorializing them" (46). The problem with her relatively unqualified endorsement of revisionism emerges most clearly in Smyth's praise of *Gone with the Wind*. To the extent that Scarlett O'Hara revised the stereotype of the Southern belle, her portrayal identified her, Smyth argues, more closely with the film's black characters. That identification, reciprocated as it is by their identification with her, however, promotes the idea that the Old South was a land of knights and cavaliers (it was not!) and that most admirable Southern blacks endorsed the ante-bellum social system (most did not!).

Taking a very different tack, Guynn tries to demonstrate that, Rosenstone's caveats notwithstanding, film can meet the same criteria as history. To this end, he examines theories of historiography, narrative, semiology, and rhetoric, devoting one chapter to each area, and illustrating his conclusions with extended discussions of specific films using, like Rosenstone, dramas and documentaries. Working with dense theoretical material, Guynn provides generally lucid summaries, coming, for the most part, to sound conclusions: "Narrative is the matrix of historical explanation" (32), but "the historian is reined in by the cruel fact of *partial* documentation, in the two senses of incomplete and biased" (39) and necessarily works "on *representations* not on real objects" (44), which require of the reader the same interpretive operations in reading/viewing fiction and nonfiction. Although film's mode of representation differs from written narrative, film too can represent history. Film, like language, employs rhetorical figures and tropes, which create representative characters and characterize representative events.

Guynn applies these points to an eclectic group of films, including Roberto Rossellini's *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV* (1966), which adopts "an exclusively *mimetic* mode of representation" (89) and employs a "mise en scène [that] turns on representational irony" (95). Jean Renoir's *La Marseillaise* (1938) has "a process of figuration . . . very close to the trope of synecdoche" (114) and Mikhail Kalatazov's *I Am Cuba* (1964) "constructs characters that are both historically and cinematically coherent" (123). Esther Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) "prefigures [the] narrative by choosing two basic figurative operations: antithesis and irony" (148), and Theo Angelopoulos's *The Traveling Players* (1975) uses a kind of sequencing that "narratologists call . . . a *prolepsis*" (156) and connects some sequences through a metaphoric, rather than metonymic operation. Ken Burns's *The Civil War* (1990) and Rithy Panh's *S21—The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) powerfully affect collective memory.

As this list of comments suggests, Guynn isolates points that are, generally, commonplaces within their own disciplinary areas. In applying these commonplaces to prove that films

are history, however, Guynn's larger argument constructs a false syllogism. Certain films may use tropes, for example, as do histories. This does not prove that those films are history, any more than the fact that my cat has four legs proves it is a table. But the logical problem and Rube Goldberg structure of the book should not obscure its merits: the discussions of specific films, extracted from the book's flawed argument, are often astute; the theoretical summaries provide apt introductions to several discourses.

Nevertheless, one must wonder why Guynn ignores David Bordwell's work, notably *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Columbia University Press, 1985), *Narration in the Fiction Film* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), and Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* (Cornell University Press, 1980). These books draw on Russian formalists, applying narrative theory to film in order to distinguish between the story and the *way* the story is rendered. The distinction between story (*fabula*) and discourse (*syuzhet*) would have saved Guynn (and the reader) a lot of unnecessary work. Historical films employ, as the examples in all these books makes clear, an almost limitless array of discursive devices because the manner of rendering does not determine a historical film. Even *Lights, Camera, History*, a slim volume of six essays, engages films rendering history in sundry ways. In addition to Toplin's general defense of historical films, the discussion of *Gangs of New York* (by Nathan, Berg, and Klemyk), and Rosenstone's examination of *Reds*, the collection contains Francaviglia's coverage of the well worked-over topic of orientalism in Hollywood period pieces, and the Geoff Pingree essay on the unique, disconcerting engagement with Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Stalin, and Mao in Jay Rosenblatt's innovative documentary, *Human Remains* (1998). While specific decisions regarding script, lighting, costume, editing, and sequencing may indeed have ideological implications, providing different interpretations of an event or period, what differentiates history from fiction is the *fabula*, that is, the *kind* of story being told, not the way it is being told.

McCrisken and Pepper are on sounder ground, therefore, when they say, using a more traditional cultural studies approach, that "historical films should not be seen as transparent windows into the past but as ideologically contradictory, textual mediations whose forms and representational strategies produce, and are produced by, ever shifting relations of power" (8). While not treating ideology as monolithic, they demonstrate that many films use history and biography to promote an imaginary consensus consistent with "the political and economic logic of free-market neoliberalism currently in the global ascendancy" (11). Diverging from Toplin, who praises film's capacity for emotional stimulation, they identify bad historical films as those which "encourage [audiences] to feel rather than to think" in order to promote "a falsely or problematically inclusive desire to represent everyone's point of view" that "effectively conceals the ways newer, friendlier and more diffuse strategies of domination are manifesting themselves" (11).

In chapters devoted to films about the American Revolution, slavery, the Civil War, World War II, Oliver Stone, Civil Rights, and American post-Cold War interventionism, they identify several "bad" historical films as well as "good" historical films, "those which compel us . . . to critically engage with their representations of the past" (11). *Revolution*, the 1980 flop about the American Revolution is, according to McCrisken and Pepper, vastly superior to the Mel Gibson hit, *The Patriot* (2000), in that the former raises questions about the messiness of incipient democracy and the chaos of war, whereas the Gibson vehicle draws overly clear lines between types of violence, valorizing the violence performed on the side of the "white middle-class family" (35). *The Patriot* also makes the nongovernmental militias—rather than Washington's Continental Army—the cornerstone of independence, and it privileges the triumph of white Southern landowners at the expense of reflecting the realities of a slave-based society. McCrisken and Pepper show recurring concerns about contemporary Hollywood's promotion of a neoliberal view that values diversity while erasing racial, ethnic, or national difference. A notion of homogenized consensus, for example, informs both the 1977 *Roots* television mini-series and Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997), a depiction of the case surrounding a slave ship rebellion that makes the Africans "cosmopolitan" through their exposure to American and Judeo-Christian values. *Gettysburg* (1993) similarly levels difference because "the desire to make every soldier on the battlefield sympathetic [obscures] the complex reasons and motivations that underpin the conflict in the first place" (65). While conceding the value that Rosenstone finds in *Glory* (1989), McCrisken and Pepper's approach to the film differentiates their work from his: "the subversive possibilities suggested by the film's unconventional racial politics dissolve in the face of a relentless quest towards order and management whereby everyone is assigned a clear role and has the opportunity to assert their [*sic*] voice but where nothing changes, or is ever likely to change, because consensus is always achieved and achievable" (71). Similarly, their book thus provides nuanced discussion of what is good about *Panther* (1995), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Ride with the Devil* (1999), *Ali* (2001), not as

good about *Malcolm X* (1992), and not very good about *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Hurricane* (1999), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), and *Cold Mountain* (2003).

Focusing on films from this perspective recognizes that they not only manifest ideology but also perform it as public narratives, as international commodities, and as objects of study. In that last capacity, films can function well to interrogate conventional wisdom, for which McCrisken and Pepper praise Oliver Stone, supported by extended discussions of *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *JFK* (1991), *Heaven and Earth* (1993), and *Nixon* (1995). But films function equally well to consolidate false consciousness. McCrisken and Pepper propose a performative understanding of the history film. Rather than attempting to prove a film *is* history, the other authors interested in this topic might, in the same way, consider the kind of work history does. Perhaps all films to some degree convey accurate facts, portray settings and practices, question extant interpretations, expose controversies, stimulate interest. Perhaps they all condense, highlight, and focus as well as reflect the privileged assumptions and metanarratives that surrounded their production. But some films perform more of these tasks, some fewer; some films perform the tasks well, some very poorly.

All the authors here, even when most diverted by the chimera of "film as history," show how some films do some historical work. As a corollary to a point Guynn stressed—that all history is partial—several of the authors might consider that all films are partially historical, and therefore that, as McCrisken and Pepper assert, "What we need to do is explore the complex ways in which *all* films simultaneously collude with and contest dominant ideologies and discursive formations" (163). Merely proving a film is history sets the bar for films too low, when comparing films to history books, which must be judged on how well they perform the tasks expected of history. This shift calls for some reorientation among many of the "Film is History" cadre, who might be better off not overvaluing history as a genre while devaluing it as a pervasive aspect of culture, lest their love of cinematic representation lead them to emulate the characters in *The Blair Witch Project*, who, seduced by notions of cinematic authenticity, wander the woods evoking history to remind themselves that if they keep going in the same direction they can't be wrong.

ALAN NADEL is the author of several books, including *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams: Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America* (Rutgers University Press, 1997).

DIRECTORS

RUSSELL MERRITT

Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination
by Neal Gabler

The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney
by Michael Barrier

We know Walt Disney by now. We have had seventy years to study him, a chance to read an infinitude of articles and some fifteen biographies in order to find out how the man matched up with his iconic characters, the landmark cartoons, the TV shows, his theme parks, and his ever-expanding corporations. Even the contradictions that complicate his life—the unassuming egocentric, the avuncular schizophrenic, the guilt-ridden son and doting father, the philistine on the margins of serious art—don't seem particularly strange or profound any more. As his long-time secretary said, "There was nothing subtle about that man at all, believe me" (*The Animated Man*, 117). The challenge the Disney biographer faces is no longer to uncover the secret Disney lurking behind the genial public face, but rather to compress and explain a career astonishing for its hyperactivity, range, and influence. Neal Gabler in the most comprehensive biography to date takes more than 800 pages to tell the story, and even so must skimp on a lot. To give an idea of what a serious biographer has to contend with: in 1938 alone, Disney was supervising *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and *Bambi* (1942), while doing preliminary work on *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) and *Peter Pan* (1953), building a new studio in Burbank, and releasing one cartoon short every three weeks. Twenty years later, when he had lost the intellectuals but had become king of American popular culture, he had finished Disneyland, was overlooking three TV series on ABC, producing his final animation feature *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), and releasing another three live-action features. By now, however, he saw himself as a visionary planner and so spent the lion's share of the year planning other Disneylands and recreation complexes all over the country. Any biographer trying to make sense of such a far-flung body of work faces a Herculean task—one made more compelling when the work that resulted has had such an indelible impact on American and European culture.

As for the man himself, the threads Gabler finds are an abiding need for absolute control and relentless dissatisfaction—with his work, his employees, and current technology. Lurking behind the hyperactivity, Gabler argues, was Disney's

good about *Malcolm X* (1992), and not very good about *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Hurricane* (1999), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), and *Cold Mountain* (2003).

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As for the man himself, the threads Gabler finds are an abiding need for absolute control and relentless dissatisfaction—with his work, his employees, and current technology. Lurking behind the hyperactivity, Gabler argues, was Disney's

ruthless need to push himself and his company to new, self-imposed frontiers. It is entirely characteristic that, after his studio created the gargantuan multi-plane camera to enhance the illusion of three-dimensionality, Disney immediately demanded special depth effects the camera couldn't handle. For Gabler, the logic of moving from animation to Disneyland and beyond was that unlike the cartoons, the parks need never be finished. With the theme parks, Disney finally created epic contrivances from which he never had to disengage and which he could tinker with forever.

Gabler has written one of the two most recent Disney biographies—Michael Barrier has written the other—each of which takes a strikingly different approach to its subject. Neither is hagiographic, but both take pains to disassociate themselves from the Disneyphobes and muckrakers. It is a great relief to read two Disney studies that have not a thing to say about Disney and children's buttocks, and finally trash the idea that Disney was an anti-Semite.

Gabler's book in particular is notable for its even-handedness. He is a first-rate narrative writer and his great achievement is to find the underlying logic in the history of a mercurial studio continually being pushed to the brink. Gabler is especially good in making sense of the complicated financial wranglings in the late 1920s and early 30s, when amid the creation of Mickey Mouse and the Silly Symphonies, Disney and his brother Roy scrambled for financial stability in the cut-throat world of independent animation. Gabler has a gift for making vivid the personalities not just of the great Disney animators and directors like Wilfred Jackson, Bill Tytla, Milt Kahl, and Art Babbitt, but also the businessmen and bankers. Here he is on Marc Davis, one of the post-European misfits to become a major Disney animator and character designer: "the son of a first-generation Jew of Russian extraction who traveled the country with a mindreading act before finally landing in Klamath Falls, Oregon" (229). To paraphrase a line of Anthony Lane's, there's a Nabokov novel buried in that sentence.

Meanwhile Gabler has written far and away the best accounts of the most controversial events in Disney's career: the ruinous 1941 labor strike, Disney's encounter with HUAC, and Disney's strategic moves in the 1950s into television, Disneyland, and assembly-line live-action films. His analysis of how rumors of Disney's anti-Semitism emerged is another model of scrupulous scholarship and careful detective work.

Unfortunately, what are virtues in Gabler's accounts of the studio history and Disney's personal history, work against him when analyzing the films themselves. In an effort to be definitive, Gabler typically resorts to summing up an array of critical opinion, and then adds incidental insights. The result is a series of bland, uninspired, middle-of-the-road appraisals that appear anticlimactic after the richly detailed, often highly dramatic accounts of the films' manufacture. Fascinated by the details of how Disney's cartoons and live-action films get made, Gabler doesn't seem all that interested in the movies themselves except as company product and social artifacts. There are no surprising judgments, fresh insights, or startling comparisons among even Disney's most daring works.

For that you need Michael Barrier's biography. There is plenty not to like about *The Animated Man*, but here is what I did like. It is fascinated with the movies themselves. With how cartoons get made, with the secrets of character design, layout, and movement that usually go unnoticed even in specialized animation texts. Barrier is an ornery and often eccentric critic given to odd judgments, but he is forever noticing fresh details that keep you seeing even the most familiar Disney shorts and features in new ways. He is justly known for his invaluable interviews published in his animation journal, *Funnyworld*. But I'm even more impressed with his eye for telling minutiae and his feel for the distinctive styles of the great Disney animators who work within the constraints of group art. He is an expert guide in distinguishing Bill Tytla's line, say, from Ham Luske's or Ward Kimball's, and noticing the impact of assigning animators self-contained sequences rather than individual characters. He is also good at catching the creative ebb-and-flow as projects evolve. For all that has been written on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), for instance, Barrier is the first to notice how Disney's conception of the story dramatically matured over a four-year period, from a straightforward comic musical centered on the dwarfs where even the queen, the prince, and the vultures were to be seen as figures of fun, into something with much broader emotional range.

Unhappily, such perceptions are trapped inside a text that makes its arguments hit and run. Too often the book reads like a scattered miscellany of tossed-off snap judgments. General themes get buried under a wealth of detail. The result is a smattering of this and that, a text that never rises to a compelling argument about either Disney or his work. © 2009 Russell Merritt

RUSSELL MERRITT teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, and is co-author (with J. B. Kaufman) of *Walt in Wonderland: The Silent Films of Walt Disney* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

BOOK DATA Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination.* New York: Knopf, 2006. $40.00 cloth; $20.00 paper. 880 pages.

Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. $29.95 cloth; $18.95 paper. 412 pages.

RICHARD NEUPERT

Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies: A Companion to the Classic Cartoon Series by Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman

Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman have followed *Walt in Wonderland* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) with *Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies*. This handsomely produced volume offers thirty pages on the central themes in the seventy-six Silly Symphonies made between 1929 and 1939, plus an eighteen-page economic and technical overview of the series. Most important, there is a 150-page chronological filmography. While less compelling than *Walt in Wonderland*, this is a helpful accompaniment to the Disney *Silly Symphony Treasures* DVD compilation; it combines an attractive coffee-table format with thematic and historical documentation

While *Walt in Wonderland* argued that Walt Disney's silent career was as much a fight for commercial stability as artistic expression, this book's mission is to prove the themes, music, and lavish visual style associated with Disney were established in the Silly Symphony series. Merritt and Kaufman explain that the Symphonies, rather than Mickey Mouse, led critics to celebrate Disney for successfully combining art and entertainment. Every Academy Award for best cartoon during the 1930s went to a Silly Symphony. Beyond the combination of "manic energy" and "the polish of seasoned craftsmanship," another reason for the power of these Disney cartoons "comes from his ability to explore the complex, passionate inner life of the child" (4). However, as this statement reveals, Merritt and Kaufman rarely distinguish Walt the man from Disney the company. They reduce most corporate and artistic action to Walt himself, as in "Disney was still striving for an ever higher standard of animation" (36). There is some reference to individual animators' contributions, but they always seem to be extensions of Walt.

Part 1, "The Tiffany Line," explains that the Symphonies were granted the best animators and budgets, even compared to Mickey Mouse. Further, the Symphonies become increasingly narrative, remaking fairy tales and eventually working in more original songs. Recurring themes revolve around tensions involving childhood, families in crisis, and journey structures: "What the tales stress, over and again, is that children are lent to parents for a brief time . . . they are always ready to fly the coop" (18). Protagonists are typically loners or outsiders in one way or another. This part also incorporates much of Merritt's "Lost on Pleasure Islands" (*Film Quarterly*, fall 2005) on cartoons such as *Babes in the Woods* (1932) and *Who Killed Cock Robin*? (1935). The authors assert that Disney is ethnically rather sensitive, since few if any ethnic characters function as villains, and the heroes are often poor: "The Symphony world is a melting pot that treats pride as original sin" (21). This book does not investigate or take antagonistic aim at the cultural power or legacy of Disney films. It is a pure tribute to the creativity of Walt Disney in the 1930s.

Part 2, "Producing the Silly Symphonies," surveys production aspects of the series as it shifts from Columbia to United Artists to RKO. This chapter proves more functional for film students, granting attention to contracts, techniques including color and special effects, and animators' styles. Yet, more concrete examples would be helpful. For instance, how does one really tell Dave Hand's drawings from Ben Sharpsteen's style? Here too, benevolent Walt seems to hover over every detail, so even when the animators are broken into more efficient teams of assistants and in-betweeners, it is "to free them from the drudgery of the process" (34), which is a very different take from other historians of Disney and industrialized animation. No mention of potential labor disputes arises and there are no footnotes to provide convincing evidence or competing perspectives on this overview. It would also be nice to know more about why Disney opened the Symphonies in small markets before New York or L.A. This section left me wanting more examples of "sophisticated production values" or what made some sequences "great" or "rich" as opposed to others. Regardless, by the end, the artistic status and functions of the Symphonies are established, and motivated readers will quickly reach for their DVDs to continue the analysis.

The filmography successfully balances production information (*Arctic Antics* in 1930 cost $8,772; the 1934 Technicolor *Funny Little Bunnies* cost $21,975), theatrical and video release dates, crew names, and synopses. A great deal of archival work went into accumulating the data plus there are terrific illustrations throughout, including color posters, but also playful sketches in the margins, as in techniques for *Frolicking Fish* (1930). And every title in the filmography is accompanied by one or more images. There are appendices on unfinished Symphonies, comic strips, and a discography. The readership for this beautiful book is most likely the serious cartoon fan interested in general themes and historical information, though it will also be useful for concrete reference material on the amazing Silly Symphonies. © 2009 Richard Neupert

RICHARD NEUPERT is the Wheatley Professor of the Arts and coordinates Film Studies at the University of Georgia.

BOOK DATA Russell Merritt and J. B. Kaufman, *Walt Disney's Silly Symphonies: A Companion to the Classic Cartoon Series.* Gemona, Italy: Cineteca del Friuli, 2006. Out of print. 256 pages.

DAVID STERRITT

Hitchcock's Romantic Irony by Richard Allen

Half a century after Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol inaugurated Alfred Hitchcock studies with their 1957 monograph, Sir Alfred remains the all-time-favorite filmmaker of sophisticated cinephiles. Few have been more consistent in their interest or judicious in their ideas than Richard Allen, coeditor of the esteemed *Hitchcock Annual* and author/editor of various Hitchcock books and articles. In the opening pages of his perceptive new study, *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony*, he stakes out clear positions on theoretical issues subtending his approach. He is not against interpretation, he assures us, but he rejects the "bad" kind, in which meaning is *made*, in favor of the "good" kind, in which meaning is *discovered*. The proper guide and goal for interpretation is poetics, a "practice of descriptive generalization" (xii) that clarifies the patterns of style, content, theme, and form in a filmmaker's work; here Allen follows the lead of film scholar David Bordwell, and one measure of this book's success is its avoidance of Bordwell's fussiness—the arguments don't lose sight of Hitchcock's cinema as a set of living, vibrant *experiences* that operate on sensual and affective levels as well as abstract and intellectual ones.

Rejecting the false dichotomy of Hitchcock as enthralling (immoral) showman versus Hitchcock as earnest (moral) philosopher, in the book's preface Allen places him in the (amoral) category of "romantic ironist," committed to a both/and logic that simultaneously affirms and criticizes the norms, ideals, and values that circulate through his narratives. Suspense and pitch-dark humor are romantic irony's main vehicle, and aestheticism is its main stylistic mode. This aestheticism, closely linked to Hitchcock's fascination with perverse sexuality, can take a "masculine" form, as in *Rope* (1948), which uses style to distance sexuality in the manner of a joke, or it can assume a "feminine" form, as in *Rebecca* (1940), which uses style to figure the "sublime allure" of perverse subjectivity (xvi). In *North by Northwest* (1959), romantic irony gives birth to transformation and renewal; in *Suspicion* (1941) it breeds an all-embracing ambiguity; in *Vertigo* it fosters "a downward spiraling trajectory of negation" (xiv). However many shifting shapes it takes, the near-ubiquity of romantic irony accounts for both the unity and the diversity of Hitchcock's work.

Allen elaborates these ideas in the book's main sections, one on narrative form and one on visual style. He expends (too) many words tracing the pedigree of romantic irony from Friedrich Schlegel, who never used the term, to various twentieth-century critics who tease out distinctions within romantic irony—between objective and subjective modes, lateral and vertical inscriptions, romantic and ironic components. Allen then rehashes the well-worn Hitchcockian contrast between suspense and surprise, relating the former to problematics of knowledge, fear, and the way Hitchcockian narratives can seduce beholders away from their ordinary ethical standards, as when we root for Bob Rusk of *Frenzy* (1972) to find his missing tiepin. In subsequent chapters Allen rebuts poststructuralist claims to Hitchcock as a poet of the empty signifier; discusses Hitchcockian dandyism and some films' commentary on the relationship between representation and referent, in the manner of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; makes the case for German expressionism as a key influence on Hitchcock, with arguments less developed but more keenly focused than John Orr's in *Hitchcock and Twentieth Century Cinema* (Wallflower Press, 2005); contemplates what Slavoj Žižek calls the Hitchcockian Blot, an incongruous "stain" that signals the immanence of a "chaos world or shadow world" (140) that threatens our habitual reality; and analyzes the emotive, dramatic, and semiotic roles of color in Hitch's mise-en-scène. Allen manages all this with intellectual acuity and the kind of authorial modesty that allows him to aver, notwithstanding his obvious dedication to Hitchcock's artistry, that the likes of *Topaz* (1969) and *Torn Curtain* (1966) have weaknesses that "ultimately fail to do justice to the unique cinematic intelligence [that these films] nonetheless manifest" (250).

I said earlier that Allen clearly lays out his theoretical positions, but that doesn't include any examination of auteurism, which is obviously at issue in any study of films by a single director. He may feel that auteur criticism no longer needs a fresh apologia every time a director-based book comes out, or that the practice is uncontroversial when applied to a filmmaker of such prodigious creativity; and the fact that he

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locates such steadiness of theme, form, narrative, and style in Hitchcock's work is itself a defense of the auteurist perspective. Allen's conclusions would stand on even firmer ground, however, if he had set forth a rationale for his auteur-based approach, and if he'd taken note of instances that call Hitchcock's authorship into question, as when Paramount vetoed his last-minute scramble to recall the prints of *Vertigo* so the crucial confession/revelation scene could be removed. Along the same lines, Allen has little to say about most of the brilliant collaborators—Robert Burks, Ben Hecht, Henry Bumstead, and so on—who made important contributions to Hitchcock masterpieces, although he does quote the half-baked theories of Technicolor consultant Natalie Kalmus at surprising length. But these aren't major complaints, and my other quibbles with the book are smaller still—minor inaccuracies, occasional oversimplifications, and omissions of interesting material, as when he links the opening camera movement in *Psycho* (1960) to Hitchcock's often-used bird imagery without mentioning its origin in a "fly on the wall" motif that was mostly excised from the final screenplay.

None of which should dissuade Hitchcockians from digging into this carefully researched and artfully written book; thanks to its fine scholarship, critics will be tracing the ramifications of Hitchcock's romantic irony for a long time to come. Unity within diversity. Both/and. Criss-cross. "Isn't it a fascinating design?" as Hitchcock rhetorically asked in relation to *Strangers on a Train* (1951). "You could study it forever." © 2009 David Sterritt

DAVID STERRITT is chair of the National Society of Film Critics, adjunct professor at Columbia University and the Maryland Institute College of Art, and author of *The Films of Alfred Hitchcock* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

BOOK DATA Richard Allen, *Hitchcock's Romantic Irony.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. $74.50 cloth; $24.50 paper. 296 pages.

MARTIN FRADLEY

The Impossible David Lynch by Todd McGowan

After the commercial failure of both the second season of *Twin Peaks* (1990–91) and its big-screen prequel, *Fire Walk with Me* (1992), director David Lynch was regularly dismissed as obscurantist or an aimless postmodern cynic. His reputation was restored following the widespread acclaim achieved by *Mulholland Dr.* (2001). A revival of serious critical interest also occurred, evidenced by the publication of books about Lynch: Jeff Johnson's *Pervert in the Pulpit: Morality in the Works of David Lynch* (McFarland, 2004), Erica Sheen and Annette Davison's edited collection *The Cinema of David Lynch: American Dreams, Nightmare Visions* (Wallflower, 2004), Eric G. Wilson's *The Strange World of David Lynch: Transcendental Irony from "Eraserhead" to "Mulholland Drive"* (Continuum, 2007), updated editions of Chris Rodley's *Lynch on Lynch* (Faber and Faber, 2005) and Michael Chion's *David Lynch* (BFI Publishing, 2006), and now Todd McGowan's study, which is one of the most sustained and original accounts of Lynch's uncanny and often bewildering *oeuvre*.

McGowan begins *The Impossible David Lynch* with the contention that the director's films repeatedly demonstrate a central preoccupation: "the bizarre nature of normality" (1). For this author, Lynch's movies are neither ironic nor fundamentally reactionary (as they have often been characterized). Instead McGowan sees them as interrogations of late-capitalist social alienation and, in turn, our individual reliance on compensatory fantasy. Rather than offering some respite from the oppressive nature of reality, Lynch's films are argued to demystify the fantasies which serve to structure and underpin our relationship to the material world. McGowan claims that Lynch's pop-expressionist aesthetic erases the artificial boundary between psychic and social reality, providing a surreal critique of Hollywood "realism" and our perverse relationship to the "normality" it supposedly depicts. Lynch's films "don't strike us as realistic," suggests McGowan, "because we are so enmeshed in an ideologically driven fantasy underwritten by Hollywood" (11). However, Lynch does not simply employ the Brechtian tactic of startling audiences, as many of Godard's films do; Lynch's films take as their subject a powerful desire to escape dissatisfying reality by means of cinematic artifice.

The Impossible David Lynch traces the evolution of Lynch's treatment of fantasy in a chronological series of close readings of all the feature films, from *Eraserhead* (1977) through to *Mulholland Dr.* Perhaps the most compelling aspect of McGowan's study is his revisionist impulse to continually refute the director's reputation as apolitical: "If there has been one sustained theme of criticism of Lynch's work, it has followed these lines: he creates filmic worlds that show little sign of the material world—of class inequality, marginalized people, or economic struggle" (26). As a counterblast, *The Impossible David Lynch* goes to great lengths to argue that, from the outset of his career with films like *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man* (1980), Lynch's movies have always explored the endlessly permeable boundary between individual subjectivity and the material world's ideological impositions and interpolations. This avowed emphasis on challenging critical doctrine concerning Lynch does some-

locates such steadiness of theme, form, narrative, and style in Hitchcock's work is itself a defense of the auteurist perspective. Allen's conclusions would stand on even firmer ground, however, if he had set forth a rationale for his auteur-based approach, and if he'd taken note of instances that call Hitchcock's authorship into question, as when Paramount vetoed his last-minute scramble to recall the prints of *Vertigo* so the crucial confession/revelation scene could be removed. Along the same lines, Allen has little to say about most of the brilliant collaborators—Robert Burks, Ben Hecht, Henry Bumstead, and so on—who made important contributions to Hitchcock masterpieces, although he does quote the half-baked theories of Technicolor consultant Natalie Kalmus at surprising length. But these aren't major complaints, and my other quibbles with the book are smaller still—minor inaccuracies, occasional oversimplifications, and omissions of interesting material, as when he links the opening camera movement in *Psycho* (1960) to Hitchcock's often-used bird imagery without mentioning its origin in a "fly on the wall" motif that was mostly excised from the final screenplay.

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times lead McGowan to arrive at some surprising (and occasionally hyperbolic) conclusions: the critically scorned sci-fi adaptation *Dune* (1984—which Lynch himself has practically disowned) is boldly reimagined as his "most overtly political film" (89), arguing here that fantasy *drives* social revolution; commercial flop *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* is called the director's "most important and original film" (131) because it insistently deconstructs the cultural fantasy surrounding the doomed Laura Palmer.

McGowan's individual analyses of films such as *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Wild at Heart* (1990), and *Lost Highway* (1997) are methodical, thoughtful, and largely persuasive, though the prose does have an occasional tendency to become arcane and overly scholarly, something that will doubtless alienate readers without at least some training in contemporary film theory. These lapses into convoluted conceptual abstraction are due in no small part to the author's insistence on employing psychoanalytic concepts as an integral part of his project—"films that blur the line between desire and fantasy," he writes in a representative passage, "best approximate our quotidian experience of the world, in which fantasy saves us from having to endure the inherent traumatic desire of the Other unprepared" (17). Of course, this usage is in many ways understandable given the films' blend of expressionism and surrealism, and its themes of psychopathology and sexual obsession. Lynch explores—as the title of his most recent film, *Inland Empire* (2006), makes plain—the psyche's inner and unconscious expanses.Yet McGowan's claim that the director's films "make sense only if we turn to the insights of psychoanalysis" (145) is surely an overstatement. Might we not, for example, understand *Blue Velvet* (1986), with its overt foregrounding of various Freudian themes and tropes, as a *parody* of psychoanalysis? Likewise, McGowan's take on *The Straight Story* (1999)—that it presents Lynch's "mythical image of the heartland not as reality but as the result of an extreme fantasmatic distortion" (79)—risks overlooking the film's gentle humor and its self-mockery of key Lynch tropes and images, the author perhaps straining too hard to apply his thesis to Lynch's *oeuvre* in its entirety. Yet what is most admirable finally in *The Impossible David Lynch* is the author's critical imagination and theoretical ambition, which provide the basis for a genuine rethinking of a much-discussed filmmaker. © 2009 Martin Fradley

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BOOK DATA Todd McGowan, *The Impossible David Lynch.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. $75.00 cloth; $26.50 paper. 280 pages.

OVERVIEWS

DONALD F. LARSSON

Becoming Film Literate: The Art and Craft of Motion Pictures by Vincent LoBrutto

Film: A Critical Introduction by Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis

Some of us can recall a time when there was not much guidance for the nascent cineaste. Despite a handful of available film histories and essay collections, something still was missing. One had to dive into those works, sampling here and there, comparing and contrasting word with film until something clicked, some cumulative weight of knowledge finally tipped a switch that allowed you to understand what you had been hearing and seeing in the theater all along. Now there is a huge range of available resources, including *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Movies, Flicks, and Film* (Alpha, 2000); the Internet; and the mini-film archives included on some DVDs. The growth of film study in higher education has also established one pathway for the film initiate through structured knowledge, but how many film students will actually hear that click of understanding? These thoughts are prompted by two very different books with similar aims. Both *Film: A Critical Introduction* by Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Walls of North Carolina State University, and *Becoming Film Literate* by Vincent LoBrutto, who teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York, aim to introduce readers to motion pictures, yet each book's structure and content reflect a different understanding of who those readers might be.

As a college text, *Film: A Critical Introduction* is the more conventional book. Now in its second edition, this work stands apart from its competitors through its new emphasis on writing about film. Few other textbooks combine such detailed discussion of the elements of film with, in the authors' words, "the importance of developing interpretive and evaluative skills by constructing written arguments" (xii). Thus, in part 1, Pramaggiore and Wallis lay out the groundwork of film study in relation to audience expectations; formal structures of narrative, image and sound; and the extra-textual references inherent in so much of the film experience, all in relation to the goal of film analysis: "to make statements about a film's themes and meaning" (26). A discussion of different types of interpretive claims is then followed by an analysis of Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995). A similar pattern holds throughout part 2 of the book as explanations and

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discussion of narrative form, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound are illustrated through analyses of these elements at work in different films. Part 3 moves into more complex topics in discussions of social context, ideology, stardom, genre, authorship, and the film industry.

Inevitably, some explanations of terms and concepts are more confusing than intended. For example, a brief discussion of "film style" (26–27) seems to conflate narrative *form* with visual and audible stylistic elements. Illustrations pose another problem, despite the book's attractive layout, due to the extensive use of studio stills instead of frame enlargments. One particularly useful feature, though, is the presence of marginal notes next to the different sample analyses, explaining how the essay's author makes and supports a claim, provides examples, transitions between points, begins and concludes the essay, and so forth. Other sidenotes emphasize the integration of plot summaries and film terminology into the analysis, as well as how references are introduced and documented. This is a useful introductory textbook for college undergraduates, especially in a writing-focused class. It is also refreshing to find discussions of contemporary auteurs in the diverse examples offered by Ousmane Sembène, Kathryn Bigelow, Ang Lee, Wong Kar-wai, and Jafar Panahi.

Whatever its virtues, though, *Film: A Critical Introduction* remains a textbook, designed principally for classroom use. In contrast, LoBrutto's *Becoming Film Literate* is a book for the amateur cineaste who does not need the certification of course credits. This is a work to be dipped into; it builds knowledge not through the structure of a textbook, but through the accreted experience of watching and thinking about movies. The book is organized arbitrarily, in separate discussions of fifty films arranged in alphabetical order. As a result, there are startling contrasts from chapter to chapter: *Amores perros* (2000) is followed by *Annie Hall* (1977), *The French Connection* (1971) by *The General* (1927), and *Rules of the Game* (1939) by *Salesman* (1968). Nearly as startling is how LoBrutto uses each film to illustrate one particular aspect of the movies. While the link between individual films and topics is often obvious, the range of topics is unexpected, all the more so with the arbitrary juxtaposition of film to film. "Nonlinear Storytelling" in *Amores perros* gives way to "Transformation of the American Comedy" in *Annie Hall*. "Subtext in Human Expression" in *Raging Bull* (1980) is followed by "Multiple Point-of-View Narrative" in *Rashomon* (1950). Within each chapter, LoBrutto also usually introduces one or two particular terms in boldface, referring to the book's glossary, which allows him to efficiently define a wide range of cinematic devices and terms. Each chapter is also followed by a short list of related films and suggested readings.

What truly sets the book apart, though, is its author's clear love for his topic. Consider his final comments on Max Ophuls's *La Ronde*: Ophuls's "sensitive, gliding camera was more than a stylistic device; it was a cinematic philosophy that grew out of the director's worldview. The beauty of *La Ronde* underscores the reality that love is complicated by status, gender, economics, and the endless search for an everlasting satisfaction, a love that just eludes our grasp while life continues to offer temptation and opportunity on a merry-go-round existence that is forever circling" (260). If *Film: A Critical Introduction* is a book that a teacher might order for a class, *Becoming Film Literature* is a book that you might give as a gift. It won't be as useful for someone as a guide to good academic writing, but it might just tip that switch for a nascent cineaste. © 2009 Donald F. Larsson

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BOOK DATA Vincent LoBrutto, *Becoming Film Literate: The Art and Craft of Motion Pictures.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. $51.95 cloth. 404 pages.

Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction,* 2nd edn. Boston, MA: Pearson / Allyn and Bacon, 2007. $90.60 paper. 448 pages.

DAVID CHURCH

The Cult Film Reader, ed. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik

Cult Films: Taboo and Transgression—A Select Survey Over 9 Decades by Allan Havis

Over roughly the past fifteen years, a growing body of research has emerged at the intersection of cultural studies, reception studies, and fan studies. Challenging social constructions of taste—and taste's attendant associations with class, gender, and nationality—cult film studies have gradually gained a foothold in the academy. Films like *Glen or Glenda* (1953), *Nekromantik* (1987), and *Torso* (1973) are now serious objects of academic inquiry, rather than merely the subjects of lionization within the cinematic underground, or texts to be casually catalogued without acutely examining the context of their reception.

The casual approach is evident in Allan Havis's *Cult Films: Taboo and Transgression—A Select Survey Over 9 Decades*, a slim overview of several dozen films, fleshed out with scattered production facts and connections to major events in each decade (1920s through the 2000s). Introducing the 1930s chapter, for example, Havis summarizes the decade by briefly discussing the Great Depression, the popularity of radio, notable literature and music, and popular Hollywood

discussion of narrative form, mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound are illustrated through analyses of these elements at work in different films. Part 3 moves into more complex topics in discussions of social context, ideology, stardom, genre, authorship, and the film industry.

Inevitably, some explanations of terms and concepts are more confusing than intended. For example, a brief discussion of "film style" (26–27) seems to conflate narrative *form* with visual and audible stylistic elements. Illustrations pose another problem, despite the book's attractive layout, due to the extensive use of studio stills instead of frame enlargments. One particularly useful feature, though, is the presence of marginal notes next to the different sample analyses, explaining how the essay's author makes and supports a claim, provides examples, transitions between points, begins and concludes the essay, and so forth. Other sidenotes emphasize the integration of plot summaries and film terminology into the analysis, as well as how references are introduced and documented. This is a useful introductory textbook for college undergraduates, especially in a writing-focused class. It is also refreshing to find discussions of contemporary auteurs in the diverse examples offered by Ousmane Sembène, Kathryn Bigelow, Ang Lee, Wong Kar-wai, and Jafar Panahi.

Whatever its virtues, though, *Film: A Critical Introduction* remains a textbook, designed principally for classroom use. In contrast, LoBrutto's *Becoming Film Literate* is a book for the amateur cineaste who does not need the certification of course credits. This is a work to be dipped into; it builds knowledge not through the structure of a textbook, but through the accreted experience of watching and thinking about movies. The book is organized arbitrarily, in separate discussions of fifty films arranged in alphabetical order. As a result, there are startling contrasts from chapter to chapter: *Amores perros* (2000) is followed by *Annie Hall* (1977), *The French Connection* (1971) by *The General* (1927), and *Rules of the Game* (1939) by *Salesman* (1968). Nearly as startling is how LoBrutto uses each film to illustrate one particular aspect of the movies. While the link between individual films and topics is often obvious, the range of topics is unexpected, all the more so with the arbitrary juxtaposition of film to film. "Nonlinear Storytelling" in *Amores perros* gives way to "Transformation of the American Comedy" in *Annie Hall*. "Subtext in Human Expression" in *Raging Bull* (1980) is followed by "Multiple Point-of-View Narrative" in *Rashomon* (1950). Within each chapter, LoBrutto also usually introduces one or two particular terms in boldface, referring to the book's glossary, which allows him to efficiently define a wide range of cinematic devices and terms. Each chapter is also followed by a short list of related films and suggested readings.

What truly sets the book apart, though, is its author's clear love for his topic. Consider his final comments on Max Ophuls's *La Ronde*: Ophuls's "sensitive, gliding camera was more than a stylistic device; it was a cinematic philosophy that grew out of the director's worldview. The beauty of *La Ronde* underscores the reality that love is complicated by status, gender, economics, and the endless search for an everlasting satisfaction, a love that just eludes our grasp while life continues to offer temptation and opportunity on a merry-go-round existence that is forever circling" (260). If *Film: A Critical Introduction* is a book that a teacher might order for a class, *Becoming Film Literature* is a book that you might give as a gift. It won't be as useful for someone as a guide to good academic writing, but it might just tip that switch for a nascent cineaste. © 2009 Donald F. Larsson

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BOOK DATA Vincent LoBrutto, *Becoming Film Literate: The Art and Craft of Motion Pictures.* Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. $51.95 cloth. 404 pages.

Maria T. Pramaggiore and Tom Wallis, *Film: A Critical Introduction,* 2nd edn. Boston, MA: Pearson / Allyn and Bacon, 2007. $90.60 paper. 448 pages.

DAVID CHURCH

The Cult Film Reader, ed. Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik

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Over roughly the past fifteen years, a growing body of research has emerged at the intersection of cultural studies, reception studies, and fan studies. Challenging social constructions of taste—and taste's attendant associations with class, gender, and nationality—cult film studies have gradually gained a foothold in the academy. Films like *Glen or Glenda* (1953), *Nekromantik* (1987), and *Torso* (1973) are now serious objects of academic inquiry, rather than merely the subjects of lionization within the cinematic underground, or texts to be casually catalogued without acutely examining the context of their reception.

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cinema, before devoting several pages apiece to *Freaks* (1932), *King Kong* (1933), and *Reefer Madness* (1936). Throughout the book, these short reviews combine plot description, brief analysis, pertinent information about the filmmaker, and notes on the film's cultural legacy—though explicit connections back to the decade-in-summary opening each chapter are seldom forthcoming, often giving chapter subsections a disjointed feel. This brief review-essay approach thematically covers much of the same territory as Danny Peary's more expansive, if less up-to-date *Cult Movies* (Delta Books, 1981) and its follow-ups, romanticizing a cult canon based largely upon eccentricities of subject matter—especially those providing the titular promise of "taboo and transgression." For Havis, each decade spawns a number of "perverse" and "decadent" films that garner cult afterlives by bending or outright violating the social conventions of their time, and in so doing, exposing the era's fragile ideological fabric. It is not always made clear, however, whether these films are to be read as intrinsically "subversive or if they attain this condition only after subsequent fan rediscovery, influenced by specific cultural trends (such as the post-war rise of camp and arthouse/repertory cinemas or the postmodernist turn toward pastiche in the 1980s).

In his introduction, Havis aims to "differentiate two essential branches of cult films" (1): those based around popular actors or celebrities (Judy Garland, Humphrey Bogart, and Bruce Lee are among the cited examples), and those "strange and unusual tales, fantasy films, and enormously cheap, shoddy films that would often appear in drive-in theatres across America" (2). Nostalgic for the "heyday of cult viewing" that "ended a generation ago" (105) with the close of the 1970s "midnight movie" craze and the introduction of VHS, Havis's view of what constitutes "cult film" seems narrow; after all, it would be difficult to accurately track the historical evolution of cult cinema without acknowledging the subcultural crosscurrents that contributed to Garland the camp icon, Bogart the infinitely quotable antihero, and Lee the crossover kung fu master. Lagging behind much recent cult film scholarship, Havis's "vest-pocket chronology" (1) is ultimately hindered in both scope (assessing only three films per decade), and depth (paying insufficient attention to reception). *Cult Films* may, however, serve as a quick primer for students seeking supplemental information on a selection of noteworthy cult films, opening doors to further viewing experiences.

Meanwhile, in *The Cult Film Reader*, a sizable anthology aimed at students, editors Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik endeavor to encapsulate the history and diversity of cult film studies, introducing the book by noting that, although the concept of "cult" has become widespread and highly marketable in mainstream society, efforts at clearly defining what constitutes a cult film have yielded few satisfying results. Dissecting the criteria that often combine to constitute a cult film, they arrive at a workable definition based around the notion of an "active and lively communal following . . . at odds with the prevailing cultural mores" (11), stressing the need to analyze cult films both textually and in terms of reception. At certain points in the anthology, however, their notion of "cult" seems overly porous, as when they state that "some territories' cinema, like Cuba, Africa, Iran or Mongolia, is so poorly distributed that any film from there is an international cult phenomenon—simply by virtue of making it to festivals, videostores or cinemas at all" (278). Nevertheless, the editors have selected a suitably broad range of perspectives for inclusion, each contextualized by a brief preface and notes on excerpting. The book is divided into "four major ways of studying cult cinema" (13)—"The Concepts of Cult," "Cult Case Studies," "National and International Cults," and "Cult Consumption"—though considerable overlap exists between them. Each section's introduction briefly outlines general terminology and key issues, including the films' history, historiography, fandom, censorship, and films' transcultural reception. The book also features an expansive bibliography of related research (though citational information has unfortunately been removed from most of the essays).

Laying out the historical and theoretical groundwork, section 1 proceeds largely chronologically, beginning with accounts of early film cults in the 1930s. Subsequent essays introduce important concepts like camp, intertextuality, and ideology in relation to cult films. Later in the section, Jeffrey Sconce's "'Trashing' the Academy" (1995) introduces the concept of "paracinema," or the ironic celebration of cinematic detritus as a counter-cinematic reading protocol. This watershed essay inaugurated cult film studies' expansion, leading to work such as Joan Hawkins's exploration of how cultish privileging of bodily affect can disturb cultural hierarchies between European art films and trash cinema, belying the supposedly different functions of that affect in low and high culture. Concluding the section, Mark Jancovich analyzes intra-subcultural struggles for distinction among cultists, critiquing paracinema's use of high-cultural competences and anti-mainstream class biases as "a species of bourgeois aesthetics, not a challenge to it" (154). While several of the often-anthologized pieces included here (such as Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp") may already be quite familiar to many readers, they contribute to section 1's overall utility as a compilation of key theories about the dynamics of cultism.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

James Naremore: the best of cinema in 2008

Madrid film culture

Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* reissued

Much of cult film studies, however, is dominated by more specific case studies of individual films, directors, or genres, of which section 2 marshals together a workable sampling. Less successful cult film anthologies are sometimes overburdened with case studies so intent on reappraisal through a particular theoretical framework that the potentially reactionary connotations of "transgressive" imagery are sidestepped or glossed over. But while "exploitation" is far from a bad word in cult film studies, and overdetermined readings for political correctness are typically anathema to all things cult, especially effective analyses do take a given film's political ambiguities into account. Such productive readings are exemplified by Eric Schaefer's chapter on the unsettling sensations of viewing gendered spectacle in post-war burlesque films, and Harry Benshoff's essay on the uneasy overlap between race, gender, and genre in blaxploitation horror films. Meanwhile, several other contributions to this section may be relevant in demonstrating the history and variety of cult cinema, but are perhaps a mixed bag in terms of potential usefulness for students. Although gender politics factor into various pieces in the book, it is quite unfortunate that the crucial matter of cult films being made predominantly by and for men is not more satisfyingly addressed head-on, as it has been in several essays published elsewhere. Doris Wishman, one of the few famed female cult auteurs, receives only passing mention.

As with any anthology, one can quibble over certain selections, but section 3's focus on "international" cult films capably addresses the problematic exoticization and shifting cultural contexts of transnational cult cinema. Mathijs and Mendik observe that "because cult films are already standing 'apart' in their own environments, they are not representative of their culture—at least not its mainstream. But at the same time they can (and do) carry some of the more edgy cultural sensitivities of a region or community" (275). The interpretation of this "edginess," both within and beyond national borders, is at issue in the most fascinating essays here, such as Leon Hunt on Bruce Lee's tenuous position between east and west in the Americanized kung fu actioner *Enter the Dragon* (1973); and Harmony Wu discusses Peter Jackson's early career in terms of the conflict between horror's cultural marginality and New Zealand's national marginality. Especially intriguing for further research is Sheila J. Nayar's essay on primary orality as a basis for the international appeal of Hindi and other national popular cinemas, including the Hollywood blockbuster.

Section 4 focuses on cult consumption, rotating around "three major constellations of spectatorship: problematic audiences, fandom, and critics" (369). Most of these pieces are undergirded by questions of how viewers negotiate the divide between subcultural and high-cultural capital through overlapping critical and fannish stances. This particular section can also serve students well as a collection of analytical methods for studying the peculiar reception patterns of cult audiences. For example, David Sanjek offers a discursive analysis of subcultural distinctions among competing horror fanzines, Bruce A. Austin provides an empirical study of the theatrical audience for *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and Henry Jenkins presents an overview of how strategies of reappropriation make fans into "textual poachers."

Despite its mostly minor flaws, *The Cult Film Reader* as a whole encompasses many of the key trends in cult film studies, making it a highly valuable resource. With cross-references to more established areas of Film Studies, the anthology's wide scope effectively validates cult cinema's potential to enrich the discipline. While the longevity of the current growth trend in cult film studies remains to be seen, its impact is already being felt. Understanding the full range of cinema's aesthetic and industrial practices requires accounting for those films previously considered too strange or distasteful for scholarly attention, as this anthology amply demonstrates. © 2009 David Church

DAVID CHURCH is a Ph.D. student at Indiana University, currently editing a book on Guy Maddin.

BOOK DATA Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik (eds), *The Cult Film Reader.* Maidenhead, U.K.: Open University Press/McGraw Hill Education, 2008. $136.95 cloth; $52.95 paper. 576 pages.

Allan Havis, *Cult Films: Taboo and Transgression—A Select Survey Over 9 Decades.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008. $21.95 paper. 128 pages.

D. K. HOLM

Me and You and Memento and Fargo: How Independent Screenplays Work by J. J. Murphy

Accusing independent film of being in a state of crisis is probably inflammatory, but at the very least the genre/label/economic designation is suffering an identity crisis. Since the identification of this amorphous cinematic category around 1977, independent films have evolved from arthouse favorites made by visionaries scraping by on the fringes of mainstream production and distribution systems, to well-advertised burnishers of studio résumés. They have been championed at festivals and in the pages of national newspapers, and also reviled by various critics (and even some filmmakers) for thriving under a false or misleading appellation. As J. J. Murphy asks in the course of this book, "it is difficult to think of a $6.5 million film as truly independent" (65). Murphy's volume, which goes a long way toward clarifying both the status and the efficacy of the label, scrutinizes so-called independent film at the nexus of money and art, of creation and reception, of audiences mass and small. A result of the book, perhaps unintended, is that readers, reviewers, and viewers alike might ponder raising their standards for both the definition and the ultimate value of the works that fall under the independent rubric.

Though ostensibly a guide to story structure and character development in independent film screenwriting, Murphy's book also juggles close readings. In its "manual" half, Murphy, a filmmaker as well as a professor of film in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, consequently takes a stand against standardized screenwriting manuals (by writers including Linda Seger, Richard Walter, and Syd Field), while still buying into the three-act structure most of them advocate. A reader may grow skeptical that the three-act structure aids in understanding films as structurally unconventional as *Slacker* (1991) and *Elephant* (2003)—this idea of structure, and the manuals Murphy attacks, may actually be more relevant to the restricted formats of episodic television than to contemporary movies.

Me and You and Memento and Fargo is divided into four large sections (sort of a four-act structure). Each section deals with three films illustrative of an approach that independent filmmakers tend to take to their material. Section 1 deals with varieties of protagonists: the ambivalent protagonist (*Stranger Than Paradise* [1984], whose "real brilliance" has to do with "its young and disaffected characters who, through their erratic behavior, nevertheless manage to engage us with their idiosyncratic sense of style, deadpan humor, and unexpected charm" [45]), the passive protagonist (*Safe*, 1995), and shifting protagonists (*Fargo*, 1996). The second section focuses on plots: indie films with multiple plots and subplots (*Trust*, 1990), with shifting goals (*Gas Food Lodging*, 1992), and those with ensemble casts balancing numerous stories (*Me and You and Everyone We Know*, 2005). Section 3 tracks the fad for time-fracturing: divided by flashback structures (*Reservoir Dogs*, 1992), temporal complexity (*Elephant*), and puzzle films (*Memento*, 2000). Finally, Murphy takes up causality by examining scripts that employ dream logic (*Mulholland Dr.*, 2001), free association (*Gummo*, 1997), and character-based narratives (*Slacker*).

Nitpickers will object that some of these categories are fluid. Why is *Trust*, for example, presented as an ensemble piece when there is clearly a pair of main characters? Isn't the time disjuncture in *Reservoir Dogs* based on more than just the use of flashbacks (a term that director Tarantino himself eschews, arguing instead for an idea of novelistic complexity)? Murphy's choice of case studies can furthermore be surprising. Does Miranda July's *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, a sentimental favorite among mainstream critics, really merit Murphy's lengthy critical exegesis? But maybe this goes with the territory: the "indie" tag has often allowed filmmakers to get away with sloppiness and incoherence—in Murphy's terms, the "ambivalent or passive protagonist" who can "flatten drama" and the "multiple characters and plotlines" that can "diffuse drama" (262)—the like of which would have been unthinkable in the classical Hollywood system, where narrative sense and character motivation were always at a premium.

Me and You and Memento and Fargo has numerous valuable observations. Murphy's laying out of the actual plot of that sloppy portmanteau work forged from the shards of a rejected TV show, *Mulholland Dr.*, is refreshingly helpful. In addition, Murphy's analysis of the Coen brothers' use of language is stimulating; his linkage of *Fargo* to models such as *Psycho* (1960) is surprising and enlightening. There is enough insight into how films such as *Elephant* and *Memento* work to amply compensate for occasional solecisms such as "final end" (106) and "verbal dialogue" (103). Overall, by associating independent cinema with arthouse traditions rather than the commercialization which has increasingly overtaken the movement, in the process often making it hard to define what is and isn't independent, Murphy clarifies our thinking. © 2009 D. K. Holm

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BOOK DATA J. J. Murphy, *Me and You and Memento and Fargo*. New York: Continuum, 2007. $85.00 cloth; $19.95 paper. 289 pages.

RECONSIDERING JOHN FRANKENHEIMER

Each of the books under review assures us that Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), which had been withdrawn from circulation sometime after the J. F. Kennedy assassination, was first re-exhibited at a special screening at the New York Film Festival in 1987, a screening which in Stephen Armstrong's words "eventually prompted United Artists to give the film a second theatrical release" (23). These assurances are misleading. *The Manchurian Candidate* was shown on September 24, 1982 at the Pacific Film Archive (PFA) in Berkeley as curtain raiser for a series on "Hollywood and the Cold War" put together by Michael Rogin and my good self (with the invaluable assistance of Lynda Myles, Nancy Goldman, and Judy Bloch). Earlier, *The Manchurian Candidate* appears to have been in and out of non-theatrical distribution (the PFA had shown it in 1974), but by 1982 it had become both hard to get (simultaneous permissions had to be obtained from the agents of Frank Sinatra, of George Axelrod, its screenwriter, and of Frankenheimer himself) and hard to see (the PFA, much as I had hoped, was packed to the gills that night).

It was "Hollywood and the Cold War" that kick-started a remarkable series of books by Michael Rogin that I wouldn't want to be without, and which is also important to Matthew Frye Jacobson and Gaspar González. Rogin's name has a longer listing in *What Have They Built You To Do? The Manchurian Candidate and Cold War America* than anyone else's, except those of Frankenheimer and Richard Condon, the author of the original novel. Rogin's work is by contrast unmentioned by Stephen Armstong, whose *Pictures About Extremes: The Films of John Frankenheimer* is a rather flat career survey which, determined to be comprehensive, gives equal opportunity to every single item in the director's quite extensive filmography, overlooks the marked unevenness of this output, and fails to award *The Manchurian Candidate* the pride of place it deserves. The blurb on this book's cover describes it as "a traditional auteurist survey," but what the book shows is an almost ubiquitous pattern of constraint on the control Frankenheimer was able to exercise not so much over *The Manchurian Candidate* (when for once he was well and truly in the saddle) as over project after project that came his way later. As such, the book makes depressing reading, though it does, in fairness, lay out all the details of production crews, actors, and published reviews of each and every production, thus providing an invaluable service.

What Have They Built You To Do? takes a very different tack, and is by far the better book. It extracts *The Manchurian Candidate* from the manifold frustrations of Frankenheimer's career and places the film where the authors (and I) think it belongs: plumb in the center of Cold War counter-subversive discourse—the same discourse, they would insist, that in all its obfuscations, contradictions, and paradoxes still obtains today. The Cold War may be over and done with, but the U.S. National Security State is still in place. As part of this unwanted shelf life, and of a no less unwelcome pattern of senseless discourse, *The Manchurian Candidate* richly deserves the kind of detailed (if racily written) examination Jacobson and González bring to bear. In their introduction, in particular, they are right on target: "the circuitry of ideas and ideologies from the cultural realm to the political and back again *matters*—it mattered in 1962, in the wake of Korea and at the dawn of Vietnam; and it matters still, as the Cold War's end has come merely to mark the beginning of a new and seemingly perpetual 'war on terror'" (xiv).

More specifically, "*The Manchurian Candidate* . . . appeared at a peculiar juncture in [U.S.] political life—that moment when [Joseph] McCarthy had been so thoroughly discredited that a sound satirical thrashing was possible, but yet when the communist threat and the McCarthyite vocabulary for discussing it retained enough salience that a communist plot to take over the White House could provide the stuff . . . for a plausibly compelling political thriller" (83). Which is to say that *The Manchurian Candidate*, like Don Siegel's 1956 *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, transcended in the event the left-liberal intentions of its director: "the film has it both ways on the McCarthy question," not because of sophisticated measurement of audience metrics and preferences, but "just as the nation itself had it both ways in the early 1960s" (83). In this way, the fact that *The Manchurian Candidate*'s "articulations of anticommunism and anti-anticommunism are inseparably conjoined . . . speaks eloquently to the convoluted,

Film Quarterly, Vol. 62, No. 3, pps 90–91, ISSN 0015-1386, e-ISSN 1533-8630. © 2009 The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/FQ.2009.62.3.90

contradictory textures of Cold War culture," just as Jacobson and González say; the film "is a text not simply *on* the Cold War but *of* it, participating subtly but deeply in the fortification of precisely the political edifice it would seem at first to demolish" (99).

The line "What have they built you to do?" is one of a series of questions posed in *The Manchurian Candidate* by Bennett Marco (Frank Sinatra) to Raymond Shaw (Lawrence Harvey), once Marco as Intelligence Officer has figured out that "they" (the Chinese and the Russians from the Pavlov Institute in Moscow) had programmed Shaw to do *something*. Marco's role in the film is in large measure to ask such questions. He asks Chunjin (Henry Silva) questions even as he is fighting him in Shaw's apartment, where he finds Chunjin as "houseboy" (read "minder"): "What was Raymond doing with his hands? How did the old ladies [in Marco's recurrent nightmares] turn into Russians? And what were *you* doing there?" Again Marco, this time in uniform, is asking such questions silently, with his eyes, at the political convention that frames *The Manchurian Candidate*'s climax, when he is, absurdly, immobilized by having to stand at attention and salute as the national anthem is played. (The ironic punctuation of the action of the film by the enforced gesture of the military salute is, incidentally, one of the few details Jacobson and González miss.)

Most important of all, perhaps, are Marco's words to himself (his answer to a long list of questions he has been casting forth) after he has at last become aware that his efforts to de-program Shaw appear to have failed: "OK, I blew it. 'My magic is better than your magic.' I should've known better. 'Intelligence Officer?' 'Stupidity Officer' is better. If the Pentagon ever want to open up a Stupidity Division, they know who they can get to lead it" (77). Marco means himself, but his words—like so many of the words uttered in *The Manchurian Candidate*—stretch further than the context of their utterance. Who among us, after all, is to say in the wake of the confection of WMDs in Iraq, and of earnest assurances from the authorities that Intelligence is not to be confused with information, that such a division *hasn't* been established, or that they *haven't* found the right person(s) to "get to lead it"? It is not for no reason that Jacobson and González quote Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (Columbia University Press, 2002) to such good effect: "the very war against communism had 'created a rationale for surveillance that was infinitely expandable'" (96). Surveillance certainly did not cease its inbuilt expansion once the so-called War on Terror had displaced and supplanted the Cold War.

Jacobson and González have given us an important piece of cultural criticism about the Cold War and its aftermath in the U.S., one that uses Frankenheimer's most memorable and disturbing film as a talisman. *The Manchurian Candidate* is both a characteristic product of its own setting, of its own time and place, and a "picture about extremes" in its own right, a film that transcends its own limits as it redefines and questions them. González and Jacobson have really done their homework, and have produced a first-rate book. It is not, however, faultless. As in many other racily written books, there are mistakes—as when, on page 160, the authors get wrong the title of *To Catch a Thief* (in a book that emphasizes Frankenheimer's interfaces with Hitchcock, yet!), or when it tells us about the "meteoric rise" (xii) of (the real) Senator Joseph McCarthy or that of (the fictional) Senator John Yerkes Iselin (26). (As far as we earthlings are concerned, meteors don't rise; they fall.) Most seriously of all, perhaps, González and Jacobson take gratuitous potshots at Greil Marcus's 2002 BFI monograph on *The Manchurian Candidate*, even though *What Have They Built You To Do?* does nothing to undercut it, and much to complement its argument. Maybe—who knows?—the reason is that González and Jacobson are relentlessly humorless in their approach—this is Serious Business, and don't you forget it!—while Marcus had dared to point out the obvious: that *The Manchurian Candidate*, whatever else it may be, is also a very funny film. More to the point, people laugh while they watch it, right down to the present day. But they don't come away from it laughing.

I've never come away from it laughing either. This does not mean, however, that I shall here forego my punchline: yes, Virginia, there *is* a Manchurian candidate. His name is John McCain, and back in the days when McCain was still an affable man he would make jokes about this himself. But then look what happened. To make a long story short, in his concession speech (which authorized Barack Obama to relieve him of the unwanted burden of his candidacy) John McCain was visibly relieved at not having to go any further with his mission—as visibly relieved as Raymond Shaw when he let go of his own unwanted burden.

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BOOK DATA Stephen B. Armstrong, *Pictures About Extremes: The Films of John Frankenheimer,* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. $35.00 paper. 244 pages.

Matthew Frye Jacobson and Gaspar González, *What Have They Built You To Do? The Manchurian Candidate and Cold War America.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. $60.00 cloth; $19.95 paper. 250 pages.